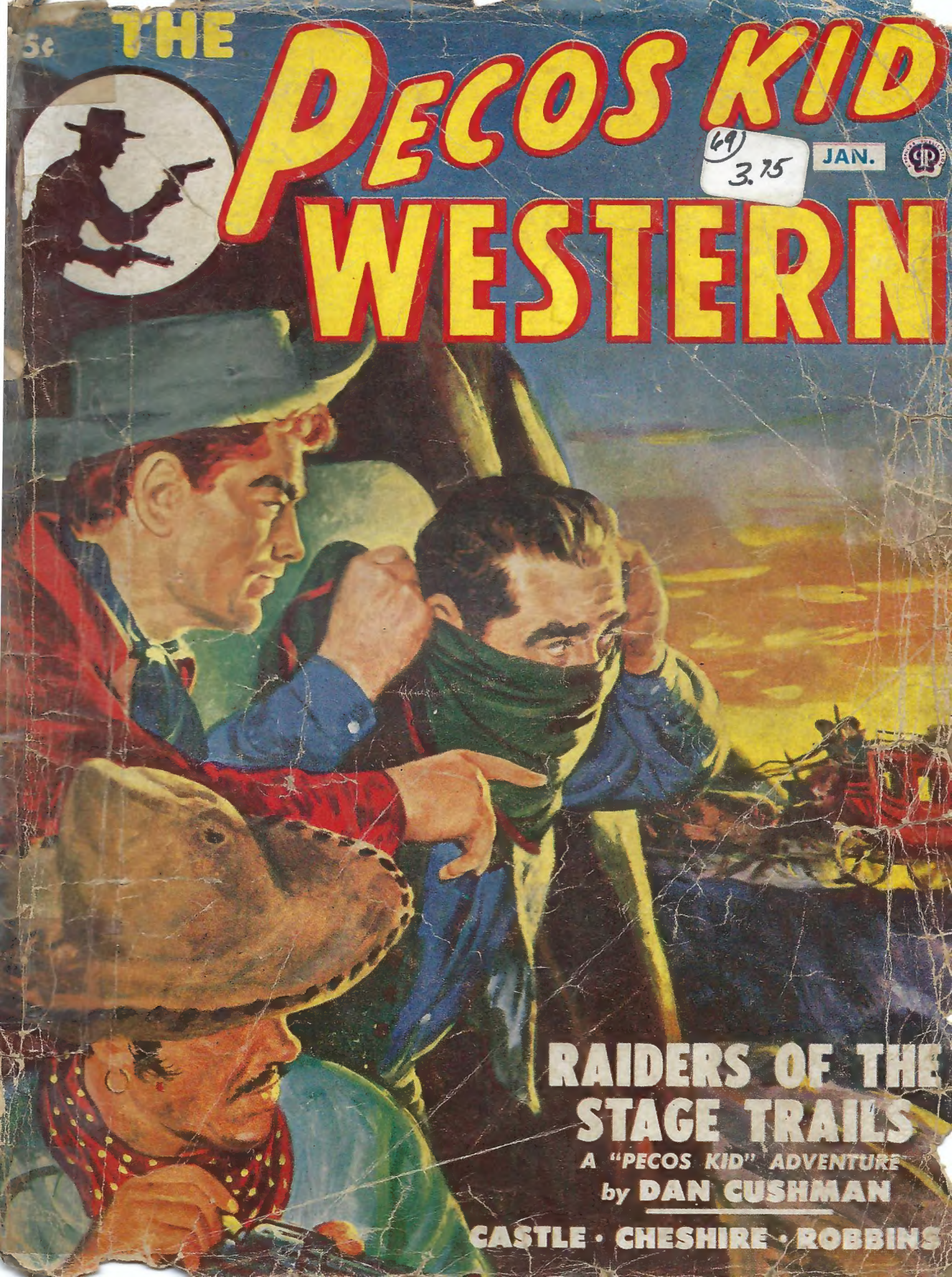
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THE PECOS KID WESTERN

Vol. 1 January, 1951 No. 3

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RAIDERS OF THE STAGE TRAILS—Dan Cushman 14

Stage-jumping was only one dangerous move in the deep game the Pecos Kid and his compadres must play, when they tangled with the man dedicated to making Montana a place of midnight murder!

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Duke Hardee had plenty of gunswift. The only thing he lacked was a friend to stand at his back in that last desperate tight.

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COLD TRAIL—Giff Cheshire 71

Gold and a girl has led many a good man into bad trouble.

LONG HAIR SHERIFF—Bob Young 101

A sixteen year old kid tried to gun down a sixty year old legend.

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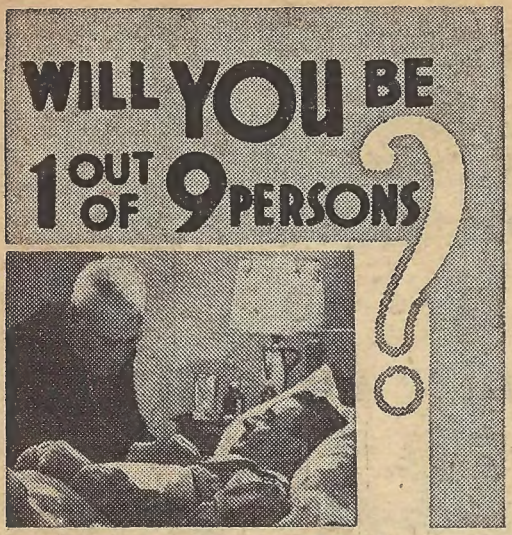

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High-Water Hoosegow

By DAVE SANDS

SAN FRANCISCO BAY became littered with abandoned ships during the years following the cry of gold in California. Crews jumped their ships as soon as the hook was dropped and the vessels were left to rot.

But when the Brig *Euphemia* was guided through the Golden Gate, her master decided the ship wouldn't end up on the mud flats. He had worked too hard for the past thirty years to lose it.

Cagily he ordered the brig held offshore, anchoring in the middle of the bay. He ordered all of the crew assembled, and offered them double wages for the entire trip if they would unload the valuable cargo, then return to the *Euphemia*. He gave them until dawn of the next day to consider the proposition.

The crew decided against staying. They reaffirmed their intention of going on to the goldfields. He offered additional lures to stay aboard; all were refused. The captain realized then unless he got the cargo off, at least, he was ruined.

The cargo would be set ashore, then the crew divided into four groups, each under the command of an officer. They would be provided with ship's boats and rations to make the trip up the Sacramento River, and when the snows blocked any further gold hunting for the year, the men and officers would return to the brig *Euphemia*.

All treasure found by the men was to be divided equally among the members, including the captain and the watchman,

(Continued on page 8)

Enter America's Biggest Puzzle-Quiz Contest!

Win $102,500.00 Cash First Prize

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SECOND PRIZE
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4th Prize	$5,000.00
5th Prize	$3,000.00
6th Prize	$2,500.00
7th Prize	$1,500.00
8th Prize	$1,000.00
9th Prize	$1,000.00
10th Prize	$1,000.00
11th through 110th Prizes, each $100	$10,000.00
111th through 210th Prizes each $50.00	$5,000.00
Total Prizes	**$167,500.00**

$25,000.00 2ND PRIZE — $10,000.00 3RD PRIZE
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Can You Solve This Puzzle?

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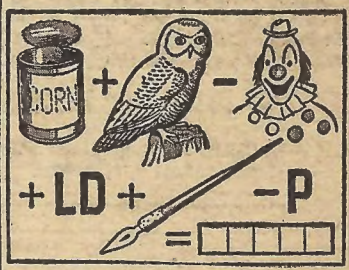

How To Solve This Sample Puzzle

First of all, note that there are a CAN, OWL, CLOWN and PEN in this puzzle. To solve it, write down CAN. Next add OWL, giving you CANOWL. Next, subtract CLOWN, which leaves you with A. Then add LD, giving you ALD. Next, add PEN, giving you ALDPEN. Subtract P, leaving you with the solution ALDEN.

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In this contest will be a series of Puzzle-Quizzes, each one based on a volume of the encyclopedia. With the free Volume 1 we will send you full details about the contest and how you can get the other volumes of the encyclopedia at the rate of three a month—each containing another Puzzle-Quiz—at a MIRACULOUSLY low price. Then we ask you just one favor. We ask you merely to LET US KNOW what you want to do.

With the free book and the first Puzzle-Quiz will come a postcard which we ask you to return. On it you can check off "YES"—that you want to stay in the contest and get the other volumes. Or you can check off "No"—that you do *not* want to stay in the contest, or get any other volumes.

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(Continued from page 6)

who would remain behind. The master would receive two shares for his loan of the boats. The plan was enthusiastically accepted by the crew members.

Presently, a fee of forty dollars was being charged for the trip up the river, and the passengers had to row. Their boats would have sails, and the prospect of wealth for all was so good that the shares given the captain and watchman wouldn't be missed. In addition, when they were all rich they would have a good ship in which to return East.

Week followed week, after the four boats pulled away from the brig loaded with happy sailors. Then the time dragged into months. The captain and watchman looked each day for the return of the crew, but they only saw the backs of other adventurers going up the River.

San Francisco's first fire nearly obliterated the city. Even ships tied up to the wharves were burned to the water's edge. But the *Euphemia* escaped the flames, and was still fairly ship-shape despite the lack of attention from a regular crew.

San Francisco began to rise from its ashes. Crime of every stripe was on the increase, and they had no jail. The captain offered a solution that could help both him and the City. His ship would be used as a jail, in return for which the prisoners would keep his ship in good order. The *Euphemia* was immediately established as the city jail, and she never went to sea again. Her crew never returned.

Its hull slowly rotted, and the *Euphemia* sank into the shallow waters of the Bay. But its use had left a lasting impression on California and the world.

"Take him to the brig," is now a common phrase, and the speaker is unconsciously referring to the Brig *Euphemia* —San Francisco's first City Jail.

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Come and Get It!

A Department

By THE EDITOR

THIS is the corner where we light and set a spell every month. If you've got anything to beef about or anything to crow about, this is where you do it. *Come and Get It* means all of you, so drop a line to the Pecos Kid and join the gang.

First comes a letter from John F. Gatenby, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Take it away, John.

Editor:

Just put down "Three for the Deadwood Drive" in the last issue of *The Pecos Kid Western*. It was a hell of a good trail herd story, for my dough.

My grandfather—his name was Pete Gatenby—used to tell me about one of the darndest trail drives you ever heard of. See if this doesn't make your eyes pop out.

My grandfather claims that this herd went all the way from Texas, across the Mississippi, across Pennsylvania, and through to the East. Word has it that the drive got all the way back to New York City where the big markets were.

He's got a clipping from a newspaper printed in Indiana County, Pennsylvania, that tells about the herd coming through. Must be a fact, all right. But can you imagine all those cows, passing through the civilized East, tossing their longhorns at the crowded little towns!

I figure that was the most amazing trail herd that was ever run. My grandfather swore the story's true. Texas to New York. Man—what a drive!

John F. Gatenby,
Oklahoma City, Okla.

Anybody else ever hear about the Texas-to-New York herd? We've checked in several books, and it is a fact that there are records telling of this fabulous trail drive. Kind of hard to believe, but fairly typical of the unbelievable accomplishments Texans were capable of.

Here's a note from Rex E. Ward, of El Segundo, California.

I've just finished reading the first *Pecos Kid* novel, and this is just to let you know how much I liked it. I'm glad to see the manner in which you are presenting such a character, emphasizing as you are the more human side of the West—yet without losing one ounce of drama and thrills. You've succeeded in portraying *The Pecos Kid* as a living example of the kind of men who had a big hand in making the greatest nation on earth just that.

Best of luck.

Rex E. Ward
El Segundo, California

Thanks a lot, Rex. That's exactly what we're trying to do with the *Pecos Kid*. We're trying to show that real men were responsible for the building of the West, real men made out of flesh and blood—not supermen made up by imaginative story-tellers.

We want to show that the Old West was a place peopled with human honest-to-God characters. We want you to be there with us while we re-live those amazing, adventurous days. We want you to feel it, not merely read it.

So keep the letters coming, gang, so we can light up and gab awhile in this same spot next issue. Until then, *Hasta la vista, amigos.*

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Crazy Like a Fox!

By L. C. DAVIS

Crazy old Ben Sublette never ended up in a booby hatch —but it wasn't because he couldn't afford to buy one!

OF ALL the gold seekers in the great Southwest none was more picturesque than Ben Sublette who went west from Missouri to prospect in the Colorado Rockies. There he saw the picks of others uncover gold in paying quantities, but Lady Luck just wouldn't smile on him.

His wife and children led a fearful existence of hunger and privation and old Ben himself went in rags. His wife tried to dissuade him from his search, but she reckoned without her husband's innate stubbornness or the gold fever that burned eternally in his eyes.

After it finally killed his companion, the gray-bearded old sourdough with his three children headed southeast and crossed the Guadalupe Mountains into West Texas. He erected a tent beside a section house and obtained work of various sorts from the Texas & Pacific Railroad. The few people who drifted there took pity on Old Ben and his "young 'uns," and he managed to eke out enough supplies for a prospecting trip, for the love of gold-hunting just wouldn't die in his restless soul.

General Lew Wallace and others had said there was gold in the Guadalupes. Ben thought so, too, but friends around the section house warned him that Apaches were too numerous there.

"Why, the Indians are my friends," he laughed. And he picked up the reins of his old buckboard and shouted at his flea-bitten nags. There were other trips also and he would return and work long enough to provide food for his youngsters and to grubstake himself. But he moved his family over to Odessa, which had a slightly larger population even though the business establishments were mostly saloons. The oldest girl was now strong enough to take in washings.

Odessans looked askance upon his precarious mode of existence, but he was more than ever convinced that there was gold in those hills. The fever was burning high now. One day he returned after being away for a long spell and hitched his team in front of the Mollie Williams saloon. The place was crowded and ignored him.

"Everybody up to the bar; the drinks are on me," he shouted.

The barkeep scowled. "What you gonna use for money, Ben?"

The saloon's occupants snickered. "It's old Ben, the crazy prospector. Bet he's found a nugget as big as a fly speck."

(Continued on page 129)

YOUR CHOICE OF TWO GREAT BOOKS

THE WRATH AND THE WIND, by Alexander Key
(Published at $3.00)

Alexander Key's novel is an intense experience. It probes the mansions, the slave auctions, the gambling rooms, the ornate hotels of the burgeoning Gulf slave ports. Maury St. John, the disillusioned young American doctor—the golden Catherine, who loved him, the mute girl Zeda caught in the slave trade—these are the principals, but the stage is peopled by many another whose portrait lingers in the mind: the slaves and slave dealers, sailors, half-breeds, wastrels, madams, dilettanti, bankers, railroad promoters, doctors—friends and enemies of Maury St. John.

The Wrath and the Wind is as cruel as sin, brutal as the plague of which Maury is the agent, solacing as late-found love and forgiveness. Alexander Key has the Gulf Coast and the sea in his blood. His writing creates an unforgettable atmosphere as remarkable as his portrayal of intense action and dramatic suspense.

OR

THOMAS FORTY, by Edward Stanley
(Published at $2.75—Third Large Printing)

It is 1778. In the print-shop of the *Loyalist Gazette* in British-occupied New York City, a journeyman printer faces up to Liberty. Tom Forty has to answer the big question freedom asks of men in any war. He comes to his fateful decision on a winter's night in Sam Fraunces' tavern, after a fight with a Tory officer. It is a long, hard journey via the patriot underground from the kisses of a barmaid to the revolutionary strongholds of Westchester. In this novel covering virtually all the Revolution Edward Stanley has created characters with the honest, unadorned bone and sinew of the time; more than this, he has re-created history with thought and care and research, until it comes vividly alive.

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Stage-jumping was a new and dangerous job for the Pecos Kid and his hard-riding compadres . . . but it was only one short move in the deep and sinister game they must play against a power-hungry man-buster—who aimed to make Montana a shrine of midnight murder!

CHAPTER ONE

Three Masked Men

AFTER a long wait, as darkness settled on the mountain road, there was a grate of coach wheels from the top of the pass, and the Pecos Kid stood up, extinguishing his cigarette.

"I reckon," he said in his easy Texas drawl, "that

Pecos saw Mutt's horse spin up in a rearing circle.

Raiders of the Stage Trails

By DAN CUSHMAN

you-all are about to become coach robbers. That is, provided you're not already."

He had two companions. One was a huge young man of twenty-five with placid features and hair the color of burlap sacking, the other was smaller, with jet in his hair, and a mobile, handsome face.

The big fellow said in a voice that was unexpectedly treble, "Gosh, Kid, I never had anything to do with coach robbin', and I can't say I got any hanker to rob one now. Robbin' coaches can be dangerous."

"Danger, pouf!" said the dark one in a south-of-the-border accent. "Danger, eet is the wine of my life, the sweetheart of my soul. In all Chihuahua was there ever a more reckless *caballero* than Hernandez Pedro Gonzales y Fuente Jesus Maria Flanagan?"

"You're a hell of a long way from Chihuahua now." William Calhoun Warren, the Pecos Kid, yawned, stretched himself, and held up a hand for quiet. There was no longer any sound of the coach. It had swung inward against the mountain, taking the hairpin bend along the head of Bird Tail Gulch.

In a straight line the coach was no more than half a mile away, but the road, winding along switchbacks, would travel four times that distance before reaching them. They still had a little wait.

Working slowly, as though he had unlimited time at his disposal, the Pecos Kid took off his Confederate cavalryman's hat, fitted a black neckerchief into the sweatband, and tried it on.

He was a slim man of twenty-eight or thirty, six feet tall, with a frame that would have accommodated 180 pounds, but a life of hard riding had taken off every last ounce of fat so he weighed a scant one-sixty. He had a long, lean jaw; bird track wrinkles lay in the corners of his mouth and eyes, but when he smiled the hardness dropped away, and there was something boyish and reckless about him.

He smiled now as he looked at Big Jim Swing who was trying to get a couple of slits in his bandanna adjusted to his eyes.

"Only way to disguise you would be saw your legs off. Aren't five men in this Montana-Idaho gold country big as you."

Big Jim finally got so he could see through the slits. He drew his six-shooter. It looked small in his massive hand. He was nervous, and whispered, "Damn it all!"

Pecos said, "Get the sawed-off. In this country, road agents most always favor sawed-offs. You don't want the coach driver to think you're a Pike's Peaker, do you?"

BIG JIM, still cursing under his breath, got the sawed-off shotgun as Pecos told him. It was an old-time, muzzle-loading percussion piece. He took the caps out and put them back again. He stood stiffly, listening while the coach wheels grated nearer. The leather-faced brake shoes could be heard, too, groaning against the tires as the coach dropped down steep grades from the crest of the pass.

Pecos said, "Now, listen—don't get trigger-itchy. Neither of you. I don't want any dead driver or shotgun guard. And I sure as hell don't want any dead passengers."

Jim muttered, "They'll think it's damn funny if we don't rob the passengers."

"They'll be too scared to think. I know. I got robbed down in N'Mexico one time. *I* was too scared to think."

"I'm too scared to think myself."

Hernandez turned from his place among dwarf junipers by the road, saying, "Scared? What sort of gringo talk is thees? Let me tell you of my uncle, General Ramon Telesforo Julio y Aldasoro de Santillo Fuente. He was Caballero de la Libertad, fighter for liberty in the

revolution, each revolution when she came along.

"Now, for money to pay his brave men two pesos each month in wages, did my uncle, *el General,* attack the stagecoach of the enemy political party, those tyrants the Democratic Liberal Republicans. Alone, weeth two guns did he stop thees coach, and on it, besides passengers, were one, two, three shotgun guards and one squad of horsemen from the government *caballería.* But was my uncle, *el general* afraid? No, he was not. Let me tell you what—"

Pecos said, "Gentlemen, you seem to be interested in forensics."

"Forensics? What is thees?"

"That, seh, is talk for the sake of it, and in this case, too damn much. Butch, you better get that handkerchief down."

Hernandez got his mask down and crouched once again by the road, a six-shooter weighting each hand, his head up, listening as the sounds of the coach grew loud, seemed ready to burst into view, then faded again.

Pecos walked into the road, stepped over the fir tree that had been felled as a block, said over his shoulder, "You know your jobs. Just let 'em know you're there and let 'em see your guns. I'll do the talking."

Uphill forty or fifty feet the road curved from sight around an almost perpendicular shoulder of stone. Moving swiftly, Pecos disappeared into scrub timber and came in view a few seconds later on a level with the shoulder which he reached on hands and knees. There he waited, hunkered, his guns still holstered.

He seemed perfectly relaxed, though excitement had brightened his eyes. Through his teeth, very softly, he whistled a tune.

The coach was close now. Its clatter and grate of movement seemed to be almost atop him. He tensed forward a trifle, peering up the road, over the crest of the little promontory. The seconds seemed to drag along, then suddenly it was there, rolling through the fir trees.

IT WAS a big coach, a Concord, pulled by a six horse team. Two men rode on the high seat. He could look down on their hats, on the sides of their faces, on their shoulders as they weaved and jounced, leaning as the coach maneuvered the close turn.

One of them, the guard, a heavy, black-whiskered man with a shotgun between his knees, moved to spit tobacco juice over the side. Then, peering away and downward through the trees, he said:

"Thar it is! That's Butte. You can always get just one glimpse of its lights from hyar. Dammit, I wish I was in Butte right now. I could do with a snort of something."

The driver, a tall, lean man with drooping mustaches made some grunting answer through the effort of handling his team.

Pecos rose slightly, rocked forward. He was poised. Then, at the planned instant, just as the lead team got its first glimpse of the obstruction, he sprang, alighting on top of the coach.

Its weaving momentum for a second almost propelled him over the side. He went to his knees, grabbed the rail. Then getting his balance, he drew both guns.

Amid excitement of the veering lead team with swing horses and wheelers overrunning them, the shotgun guard took a moment to realize that someone was behind him. He started to turn, but he froze on feeling the gun muzzle on his spine.

"Sure," Pecos said. "Live a while. You don't want to die for that other man's money."

The driver had his hands full, fighting the teams. He knew he'd get no help, and that there were other masked men below.

"All right. I'm peaceful."

"That's good, seh."

All six horses were stopped, the leaders among green twigs of the felled fir tree, the swing team and the wheelers at cross angles with the heavy coach almost overrunning them. Big Jim was on the hill side with his shotgun raised, Hernandez with a Colt in each hand stood to cover the passengers.

"Keep your hands up!" Hernandez cried in a voice with all the Spanish softness gone from it. "Hands up and stay inside or you will end up dead."

A moment before all the passengers had been shouting at once. They quieted suddenly, all except for a woman who had started to sob and an old man who kept beating his cane and shouting questions in a querulous voice.

"Damn, dirty road agents," the driver was saying as, with reins between all his fingers, he controlled each of his horses with the right twist at just the right moment. "Now you tooken to robbing the *incoming* coaches! How much of the heavy color do you think you'll take off an *incoming* coach? They running sluice boxes in Kansas these days?"

"You take care o' your horses," Pecos said. He was up now, standing. "You!" he said to the guard. "Drop that shotgun over the side."

"Sure."

THE GUARD very carefully lifted the gun, holding it by its fore end, and slid it stock first over the side. A nail had been driven there, and with a slight turn he caught it inside the trigger guard. At that instant the gun was aimed over his right shoulder at the position he sensed Pecos to be. With a tiny flinch of his wrist he tripped the trigger, and the gun exploded, driving flame and buckshot into the night. It scorched the side of Pecos' face, but he'd recognized the maneuver and shifted out of the way.

The horses were lunging again, dragging the snubbed coach. The guard, moving with the recoil of his gun, tried to go over the edge. Pecos swung his right hand Colt. It struck him in the muscle where his neck and shoulder joined.

It stiffened him. It left him in pain, twisting on his back, looking upward into the twin barrels of Pecos' .45's.

"You're lucky to be alive," Pecos said.

"Don't shoot!"

"I won't. You were just doing your job. But don't try pushing your luck any farther."

The guard shook his head.

"Unstrap your pistols."

Still lying on his back, he did so. Then he sat up and weaved his head around, getting pain from his neck.

"Now the moneybox."

The guard leaned forward, reached down, got a two-hand hold on the heavy box. It was all he could do to lift it. He grunted, heaved upward, and let it fall with a *clank* overboard.

Pecos said, "Now let's have a look in the boot."

"There's nothing in that damn plunder box. Just baggage—"

"Dump it out."

The guard obeyed, sliding over the stern boots first. The woman was still sobbing, and a man, speaking in a low voice, was trying to reassure her.

Hernandez, suspicious of someone, called out, "You, tall man! Keep your hands up or you will have your head blown off even with your shoulders."

"Nice fellows," said the driver, speaking over his shoulder to Pecos.

"We get along."

"This is the fifth time I been robbed this month. Got a guard kilt beside me t'other side o' Pipestone. You pull *that* piece o' business?"

"I might have."

"Might not have, too. I been robbed so damn many times I know every road agent in the gold country by the smell of

his sweat. Whar you hail from, down in I-dee-ho?"

"I been lots of places."

There was no second express box in the boot. He gestured with one gun toward the heap of baggage. "Put it back, all of it."

"No, it *waren't* you!" The driver sounded almost friendly. "Last bunch of varmints burned the baggage out of pure cussedness. Say, you ain't got a cigar on you? I could—"

"Take care of your horses."

"I'm caring for 'em."

He leaped to the ground, told the guard to get back on top, and backed away up the rise of the mountain, saying, "You, inside! Get down and move the tree. But be careful. We'll riddle the first man that makes a false move."

Nine men piled down from the coach. It took them the better part of a minute to drag the tree aside far enough so the driver, maneuvering along the edge of the road, could get the coach past. Then, waiting barely long enough for the last two of them to get back through the doors, he snapped his long lash, and put the team in a dangerous, downhill gallop with the coach careening after.

Standing shoulder to shoulder beside the strongbox, Pecos and Hernandez watched it out of sight. Big Jim came up, stripped his mask off, saying, "Whew! I'd never make a coach robber. Don't ever ask me to do it again. Live a hundred years, I'd *never* be a coach robber."

CHAPTER TWO

Hot Money

IT TOOK six bullets from Pecos' guns to break inside the strongbox. Pawing its contents while Hernandez held sputtering sulphur matches, he found a carton of two dozen gold watches addressed to Levine and Solomon in Butte; a sack of money weighing thirty or forty pounds, filled with quarters, halves and dollars; and there were some bank folders, one containing cashier's checks against Jay Cooke & Co., New York, made out to the Regal Silver Mines; some vouchers from the Union Trust of Denver City; and

The Pecos Kid

there were several bundles of mint-new banknotes in ten-dollar denominations.

Pecos riffled the banknotes, saying, "Why, I believe we have a talent for this business."

Hernandez grabbed for some of the money and was shouldered out of the way.

"Señor! Let me get my hands on them. So much moneys. What could I do with thees?"

"You couldn't pay one tenth of your honest debts. Keep your hands off it."

"But only the feel of it, Keed. My hands they have been so long without the feel of green money."

"No."

"You theenk perhaps I would go south weeth some of these greenbacks—as the gringo say?"

"Yes, that's just what I think."

"Well, perhaps, but only feefty or a hundred dollars. Surely of all these moneys, so beautiful, so green like the grass of springtime—"

"Keep your dirty claws out of it."

The Pecos Kid gathered everything inside a couple of saddlebags which he tied on his horse, a rangy buckskin. Then, leading the way, he set out at a swift pace along the stage road, across a creek ford, and down a gulch that in time broadened to a sage-dotted valley.

Nearly an hour had passed then, and the moon was rising. The stage was ahead of them, rolling across the bottoms, toward Butte City whose lights could be seen scattered uphill from Silver Bow Creek.

Big Jim said, "We better get the hell off this road."

"Why?" asked Pecos.

"Why?. Damn it, because I don't want any rope around my neck."

The Kid laughed and kept riding. There were hardrock mines on both sides now, their dumps making long, half-cone scars down the mountainsides. Placer diggings were deep cuts with hummocky fields of white gravel where the sluice tails were heaped.

Although the camp was scarcely more than ten years old, most of the placer mines had already been worked out and abandoned, though some big, low-grade diggings were still being operated full blast, with torches burning, and steady tons of gravel being wheelbarrowed to the headgates by lines of Chinese.

AFTER another half hour of quiet, as the coach disappeared from sight and they followed it to the outskirt shanties of the town, Big Jim Swing reined in and cried:

"We ain't going to ride straight in there. Even you wouldn't be idiot enough to do that."

Pecos said, "Why no, I sure wouldn't. We're going in the back way."

"Where to?"

"Why, seh, where'd you think? To the Butte City offices of the Three Forks Freight and Coach Company."

"Listen—I tagged with you through range war and squaw cookin'. But this is too much. Drive up there and somebody'll recognize us. Masks be damned, somebody off'n that coach will *know*. They'll find that money, and we'll stretch rope."

"All right, Jim." He sounded a little tired, his temper drawn thin. "If you want to shuck out on this, why there's the whole territory of Montana open to you."

"And what'll you do?"

"I told you. I'm paying a visit to McCabe of the Three Forks Line."

"Oh, the hell with it." Jim had resigned himself. "If you want to get hung, I'll get hung with you. I'm no coward."

Hernandez, who for miles had seemed on the verge of sleep, jolting along with his head back and eyes closed, singing a border song, awoke to say, "Of course you're no coward, Jeem. It is only that you are afflicted weeth brains which makes you out of place in thees company."

They rode among shacks and dugouts, through the crazy-crooked buildings of Chinatown, around the mountainous dumps of the Anaconda mine, finally to stop against a high, pole corral.

"This is it," Pecos said.

He dismounted, taking the saddlebags. Below, on the next terrace of the slope, stood a long, frame storehouse, and on the next, the stage office.

The stage itself was still out front, and there was a press of men around it. Pianos and fiddles made a discordant jangle from saloons and shebangs, and mixed with this they could hear voices, upraised, excited. One belonged to the shotgun guard. They couldn't understand anything he said.

They followed successive flights of rude stairs down the rock pitches of the hillside, Pecos still in the lead with the saddlebags, Hernandez next, whistling *Celito Lindo* through his teeth, and Big Jim, one hand clamped on the butt of a six-shooter, coming up in the rear.

THEY passed beneath a pole awning and looked inside the lamplit rear room of the stage station. It seemed to be a combination office and living quarters.

"Nobody home," said Pecos with satisfaction.

"Where is the guts, Keed? Why not the front door, like the gentleman, and not the back way like some sneaking peon?"

"Butch, we got a job to do. Risk for the hell of it doesn't appeal to me. I left all that kid stuff along the backtrail. I left it a hell of a long way along the backtrail. Come to think of it, I had my bellyful of risk at Vicksburg."

He went inside, dropped the bags with a heavy jingle of the silver money, said, "Close the door and blanket that window. I wouldn't want it found out we visited McCabe."

They waited. After eight or ten minutes there was a whisper of footsteps, and Pecos blew out the lamp. It still wasn't quite dark. A lamp burned in the storeroom next to them, some of its glow entering through the open door. The feet had stopped.

Pecos moved to the door and saw a young Chinese in soft slippers, loose cotton shirt and trousers.

"We're waitin' for Pat McCabe. Old friends of his. Tell him to come."

"Ho, no. Missy McCabe ve'y busy. He don't see anybody. Stagecoach robbed. Lose two, three, four thousan' dolla. Missy—"

"Sure. Tell him we got a line on the thieves. Tell him to come by himself."

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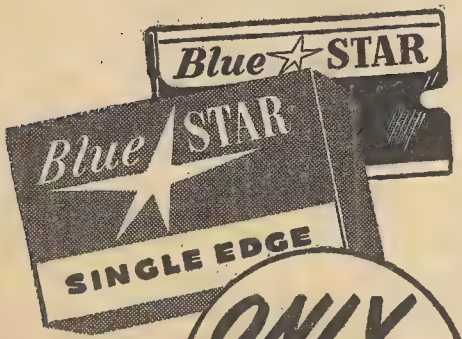

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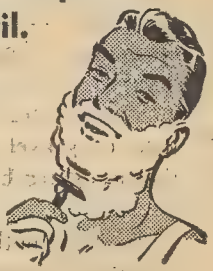

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"Ho, ve'y good!"

He left, running. In fifteen or twenty seconds a small man of middle years strode up to the door where he stopped, trying to make them out in the semi-darkness. With the light behind him, they could see he was rusty complexioned, his hair just turning gray. His face had become pinched, but it still retained a hint of the Irish good temper of his youth. A Smith and Wesson .44 was strapped around his waist, and his right hand had come to rest on the butt.

He cried, "Why are you sittin' there in the dark?"

Pecos said, "We got our reasons. You're Mr. McCabe, seh?"

"Yes, I'm McCabe."

"Then we have something to say to you." He saw that a large shouldered young man and a blonde girl had followed him from the front of the building. He added, "It's *private.*"

McCabe didn't move. He looked from one to the other, and said, "I don't know you. What could you have in private for me?"

"Are you interested, seh, in the identity of the men who just robbed your incoming coach?"

McCabe stiffened. Without another word he hooked the door and closed it, leaving the room quite dark.

"Dad!" the girl cried outside.

"Go along with you!" Then to Pecos, "*What* do you know about the robbery?"

PECOS lighted the lamp, adjusted the wick. "Why, we know nearly everything." He slid back his hat, revealing his front thatch of unruly brick-red hair. "We know how it was pe'formed, we know where the money is, and we know the identity of the robbers."

McCabe barked, "How could you know so much?"

"Because, seh, the robbers happen to be *us.*"

It took McCabe a moment to recover. "I'm in no mood to banter!"

"Me neither." The Pecos Kid, with a grunting effort, lifted the saddlebags and dropped them on the table. He unfastened the straps. "I like a good wholesome joke as well as the next man, seh, but three thousand in greenbacks is no joking matter."

He dumped first one and then the other saddlebag and with a sweep of his hands spread their contents beneath the lamp for McCabe's scrutiny.

"It's all there, seh. Bank papers, cashier's checks, vouchers, watches, currency, silver money. I hope you'll excuse me for going about this in my own way. We had a communication on that score if you will remember."

Suddenly McCabe laughed. He sat down, struck his forehead with the heel of his hand, and laughed again. "Well, I'll be damned! So that's who you are! So you're the Pecos Kid."

After shaking hands with Jim Swing and Hernandez, Pat McCabe, president of the Three Forks Freight and Coach Company, said, "If you don't mind, I'll call my daughter and the young man. He's my quarter partner, Captain John Coleman. I'm sure—"

"Like I said in the letter, it has to be private, between us."

"But man, look here! What if something happened to me and it was learned you robbed the coach? Why, it could lead—"

"It could lead to hanging. I'll take that chance, seh. In a business like this, there's always a chance involved. I'd rather take *that* chance—of swinging for robbery—than the chance that your daughter or this Captain Coleman might talk when they should be listening. It's private, seh. Between *us.* Nobody else—*just us.*"

"Oh, very well," McCabe said, and started to gather up the money.

He froze as Pecos rammed a forefinger in his back.

"Leave it there," said Pecos.

He jerked erect, "What do you mean?"

"I mean we're keeping it. Why'd you think we went to all the bother o' robbing that coach when we could have been here in Butte, having a time for ourselves? Not for the good mountain air. I had too much mountain air in my time and not near enough corn likker. No, McCabe. We did that to make road agents of ourselves. You go up and shout it from atop the Anaconda dump if you like that Pecos, Hernandez Flanagan and Big Jim Swing robbed your coach.

"I figure on using that bank paper to get on the right side of the wrong element in this camp. That's the only way we'll get to the bottom of who's been road-

agentin' your stage line into bankruptcy."

McCabe, flushing, cried, "Damn it, you have no need of the currency. You don't need to rid yourself of *that* through underground channels."

Pecos took a deep breath and for a moment he was bitter eyed. "Mr. McCabe, you're welcome to *all* of it. I understand there's big things doing yonder, over the pass of Coeur d'Alene. We'll ride there. No hard feelings, shake hands and forget it. But if we stay and bust this road agent gang for you, it'll be done our way."

Once again McCabe drove the heel of his hand against his forehead, but this time he didn't laugh.

"All right. I'm about at the end of my rope. You take it. I'll have to make it good some way, but you take it. Do it your own way."

CHAPTER THREE

The Honkytonk Kid

PLANK walks went steplike down Butte's sidehill street from one noisy saloon to the next. After a quarter-mile of them, the Pecos Kid stopped in front of a big, ramshackle building that bore a sign reading THE NATIONAL.

"Here it is," he said.

Big Jim stood tall, trying to see through the smoky windows. "What's he look like, this Ed Roe?"

"Why, I guess he's a real eyeful. Silk shirt and a velvet vest, diamond ring and a walking cane."

"Damn it, I don't like walkin' in there. I feel trapped inside. I don't mind risking my neck under the sky, but once I get closed in by four high walls and a roof—"

"Then Señor, we will take eet apart," said Hernandez, showing his excellent teeth. "Like that crook joint in Maverly."

"We're not taking *this* joint apart," Pecos said, and went through the swinging doors.

The National had a bad reputation, but one would never guess that from first appearances. This was no plank and tincup affair. Its ornate backbar must have been a tandem job for two freight wagons and how it had been brought over the hump from Salt Lake was a marvel.

The big front room was all saloon. Gambling games lay beyond an ornate colonnade. Still farther away, out of sight, was a dance hall or theater, and the sound of fiddles and a piano in polka time came through the babble of voices.

Pecos said, "You wait. Have a couple of drinks." He looked at Hernandez, "Get that?—a *couple*. And stay away from the women. Get in any trouble tonight and I'm not pulling you out of it. You can go out feet first and the hell with you."

"And the hell weeth you, Señor."

Pecos walked through the colonnade, quickly scanned the crowded gambling room. There was an archway entrance to the variety theater, and a door leading to some back rooms. Experience with a hundred places like The National told him he'd find the office there.

An ugly, heavy jawed man jumped off the lookout stool by a faro game and grabbed Pecos' arm as he was about to go in. "Hold on. You can't go in there."

"Where's Roe?"

"I don't know."

"Call him."

"Say, listen, you're not giving *me* any orders. If you—"

"I said, call him."

SOMETHING in Pecos' voice made him change his mind. He grumbled, "Well, wait here," and started down a short length of hall. He realized Pecos was following and started around, but froze as Pecos rammed a forefinger in his back.

"Keep going."

"Yeah," he whispered. He rapped at a door. "It's me. Monk."

A nasal voice answered, "All right, come on in."

Ed Roe was a soft looking man of thirty-five. He sat with his polished boots on the edge of a desk. He was probing at his teeth with a gold toothpick. He stopped and snapped it shut when he saw Pecos. A couple of men who'd been talking to him turned to look.

Monk, with his hands half raised, said, "I couldn't help it, boss. He's got a gun in my back."

Everyone else could see it was just the Kid's forefinger, and they laughed.

"You damn fool," Ed Roe said. Then to Pecos, "Well, who are you and what do you want?"

"Private matter." He looked at the others. "That's what I said—private matter. You want that dealt over? Get out!"

"You got your guts," Roe said, getting his boots down.

"Why yes, seh." He watched the men go. When the door was closed he took a money folder from his pocket and tossed it on the desk. "Look through that paper and see what it's worth."

Roe fingered the checks and vouchers. Suddenly he realized where they'd come from. "What in hell? Did you—?"

"Sure. I got them off the coach."

"And had the guts to ride in here—"

"I'm a heller for sure," he said flatly. "How much?" Roe started to object, but Pecos again cut him off, "Let's not play around. I know you take care of these things. You can have 'em passed in Helena and Benton at face value. Every road agent between here and The Hole knows that. I figure I ought to get at least sixty percent of face value."

Pecos sat tilted on the hind legs of his chair watching through cigarette smoke as Roe spent several minutes examining the papers. He noticed that Roe's fingers trembled a little. Roe wasn't the kingpin of the road agent gang. He didn't have the force, he didn't have the cold nerve.

"It'll take some time," Roe said. "Will you stick around?"

"Don't worry, as long as you got those gold vouchers I'll be around."

THE Pecos Kid sat at a table near the wall of the jam-packed little theater and watched a middle-aged man and woman do an obscene song and dance on stage. It was a tough place in a tough town. It was filled with miners off the hill, with teamsters, with gunmen, with women and the men who lived off them.

He kept wiping sweat off his forehead. The air had all been used before. It was heavy with tobacco smoke and perfume.

The song ended, and for a long time the crowd stamped and roared its approval.

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A girl in a thin silk dress sat down so close beside him he could feel the press of her shoulder. She said, "You lonesome, cowboy?"

She was about twenty-two. Her face was caked over with powder, and under it she looked tired.

"Where you from?" he asked.

"San Francisco."

"How'd you end up in a dive like this?"

"Say, what are you, anyhow?—one of them go thou and sin no more psalm-singers?"

"Forget it. Order a drink."

She called for wine. The waiter took Pecos' dollar and gave the girl a brass percentage check. Pecos drew one of the new ten dollar bills from his pocket, folded it, and tucked it inside the bodice of her dress.

While she was still showing surprise and delight with the money, he took a casual shot in the dark. "Fellow always comes to visit Ed Roe after dark. Comes in the back way. What's his name?"

The delight left her face. She was scared. She got to her feet. "How would I know?"

"Who do the girls say it is?"

"You're barkin' up the wrong tree." She was about to leave. She stopped. "Listen—there was a fellow here about six months ago asking the same question. Know what happened to him? They found him shot cold back by the Anaconda dump."

"Then I'll just keep away from the Anaconda dump."

"You better stay away from *here*. You seem to be a nice kid."

He watched her move away through the crowd. Nice kid! With the Civil War and two thousand miles of the frontier behind him, these girls from the houses still liked to call him a kid. He couldn't understand it. She was just a kid herself.

He waited. New acts kept appearing on stage. The heat and closeness of the place suddenly seemed unbearable. He stood up to leave. It was then he saw Monk elbowing through the crowd, looking for him.

"Boss wants you," Monk said.

Ed Roe was alone in the office, boots on the desk, a long panetella cigar in his teeth. He was riffling the checks and vouchers like a deck of cards. He motioned toward a chair with his bloodless fingers and said, "Five hundred for the lot."

"For twelve thousand in paper? That's less than five percent."

Roe shrugged. "Then pass them yourself."

"And end up with one of those vigilante hackamores around my neck?"

Roe took the panetella away from his teeth and dislodged the ash with his little finger. "You see? You go out there and do the butchering while somebody else gets the sirloin. Now if you worked with us, on the inside—" He spread his fingers.

It was the invitation Pecos had planned for. He hid his swelling elation behind a downward twist of his lips and sat scratching a day's growth of whiskers along his jaw.

He said, "Now, you got a thought there. You got a good thought. Personally I'd line up with the devil and the cohorts of hell if it'd put a little heavy color in my poke. I'm not alone, though. Got a couple of pals. Always deal 'em in. What sort of a deal do you suppose the boss of the Lodgepole Gang would give us?"

He didn't deny it was the Lodgepole Gang. "For the *Pecos Kid, Big Jim Swing,* and *the Greaser,* it might be pretty good."

He was smug about having their names, and it jolted Pecos a little, but he didn't let anything show on his lean, weather-branded face. He said, "By the way, I'd like to know who I'm working for. Just who's the big boss of Lodgepole?"

"An old friend of yours. Sorry, no

more information. I'll see if I can arrange a meeting for tomorrow night."

CHAPTER FOUR

A Man Called Cole

AN OLD friend of his! Pecos lay in his room above the National and thought of a hundred men off the long backtrail, and slept.

He awoke with the clang and creak of freight outfits coming from the street below. He stood by the open window, and stretched, and scratched. It has been his first night in a real bed since leaving Maverly, down in Wyoming Territory. A breeze, tainted by sulphide from a silver smelter, blew in, feeling good and cool on his naked skin.

He looked just in time to see Big Jim and Hernandez disappear inside a Chinese cafe on another street. When he got there they were half through a breakfast of salt pork and Mormon eggs.

Pecos sat on a stool beside the Spanish Irishman and said, "Looks like you got through the night in pretty fair shape."

"And what could I be but in good shape, broke and bankrupt in thees mining camp with the poorest tobacco-juice whiskey costing four beets for one drink? Señor, do you know where I slept?"

Pecos yawned and said, "Had a featherbed myself."

"A featherbed—while the friends of your heart who have lived through range war and squaw cooking by your side must be content to sleep with the horses in a feed stable?"

"Did you sleep in front of the horses or behind the horses?"

"In front of the horses, you cheap gringo saddle tramp, and now pay for the breakfast. We are without funds and these Utah eggs cost at the rate of seex beets apiece." Hernandez was mollified by the sight of money. He ordered more eggs and said, "Did you speak with the leading light of those road agents?"

"Not yet. Chance of doing it tonight."

IT RAINED hard, sending brownish torrents down the Butte gutters during the early evening, but some of the stars were out at ten o'clock when Ed Roe took them to the corral back of the National. Two men were waiting. Both were tall, and thin, and in their middle twenties.

Roe introduced a rusty complexioned one as Chevalier, the slightly smaller, darker one as Orofino Johnny.

"Your horses up at the Silver City Stable?" Chevalier asked. "Then we'll drift and wait for you at Pipestone." He winked and added, "I hear Ben Fillmore and McCabe are joining forces to import some gunmen on account of the road agentin' that's been goin' on. Five riders all in a bunch might make 'em suspicious."

Ben Fillmore, a frontier tycoon, was

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McCabe's bitter competitor for the coach and wagon freight business between Fort Benton and Butte City. There was little enough chance of them ever getting together on anything.

As they rode from town, Hernandez said, "Fillmore and McCabe's gunman talent. That is *us*, Keed."

"Fillmore doesn't even know we're here."

"McCabe knows. And why did the road agent mention it?"

"Oh, hell, nobody suspects us. The day we're suspected we'll be dead."

Hernandez grinned with a flash of teeth against dark skin. "Now *thees* relieves my mind."

Hernandez took the slicker off his guitar and sang as they rode through the long ridges of placer tailings, and outward across the flats. His voice was untrained, but it had a flexible, lyric quality that was good to listen to. Pecos scarcely noticed the passage of time as one after another Hernandez sang the border songs. It had clouded over, and rain commenced falling again. Hernandez wrapped the guitar in the slicker, not caring if the rain soaked him.

"Pipestone yonder," Pecos said. The road had started to climb into the mountains. Cut through white slide rock and evergreens, it looked like a strip of snow.

They rode past one turn, and another. "Hi-up!" a voice said. Hoofs made a rattle at the side of the road. Chevalier and Johnny came into sight. There were slight movements from Pecos and Hernandez as they reholstered their guns.

"This way," Chevalier said, and put his horse up a steep climb from the wagon road.

They followed a winding game trail through slab rock and deadfalls. Rain still fell, but it made scarcely a whisper in the deep forest. The trail improved and followed a high contour around the mountain into a steep-sided gulch. They crossed a minor divide. It had stopped raining with the stars and then the moon coming out. They crossed a turbulent little creek. All around were mountains without prominent landmarks. There was another ridge, and beyond it a sparsely timbered valley.

Chevalier reined in, cupped his hands, called, "Shorty!"

A voice answered, "Who is it? Chev?"

"Yeah. Got three recruits."

A MAN limped into sight with a Henry gun slung in the crook of his arm. "Three more? Hope they don't play poker like the last ones. That tinhorn you brought in from I-dee-ho cleaned me."

Chevalier, riding closer, saw how heavy lidded the man's eyes were and asked, "Wake you up?"

"Like hell! Cole would shoot my head off if he caught me sleeping on this job."

"He in camp?"

"Got in about sundown. He's still awake, too. Leastwise there's a light in the square house on top of the hill."

"Stay up all night?"

Shorty turned his back, but Pecos heard him growl under his breath, "Had a visitor."

"That *special* visitor?"

"Same one."

Chevalier whistled, laughed under his breath, and rode on, leading them across half a mile of meadow to some corrals of newly cut aspen poles. On a slight elevation, well removed from the nearest timber or natural protection that could be used for attack, stood a couple of log buildings. One was a long, shed-roofed bunkhouse, the other, with lighted parchment windows, was square, as Shorty had described it.

Chevalier, going to the door, found it empty.

A man was waiting nearby, concealed by shadow. "Go inside," he said. "One at a time."

Hernandez Flanagan

His voice jolted Pecos. It was familiar, but momentarily he couldn't place it. His mind traveled far back, across trails and roundup camps and boom towns. Then, recalling Shorty's reference to Cole, he knew who it was. Cole Addis. Tall, easy talking, deadly Cole Addis. His *old friend*, as Ed Roe had called him. They'd covered lots of miles, he and Cole Addis, since they opposed each other in the Bloody Clayton cattle war.

Chevalier went inside, and Pecos followed. He knew Cole Addis had a gun ready. Briefly, with the light behind him, he was a perfect target. It gave him an itch between the shoulders, a buzz of excitement in his ears. Then he was hidden by the walls and still alive. He took a breath. It seemed stifling. He swept off his hat and wiped perspiration on his rain-damp shirtsleeve.

The others came in then with Cole Addis following.

He stood in the door, fairly filling it, hands on his hips. They were careless hands, but habit had placed them just over the twin butts of his .45's. There wasn't a pound of fat on him anywhere.

He was angular big, erect, with good shoulders, handsome, with the side-of-the-mouth smile that came from habitually keeping his lips scissored on a cigarette. His eyes, very pale blue, was the chief thing detracting from his appearance. He was dressed in the best.

"Well, Pecos," he said, "so here we are together again. Who'd ever have thought it? Us meeting in a robber's roost. We both came a long way, but I guess you came the farthest. How'd it ever happen—*you* getting your fingers in a thing like coach robbery?"

"A man gets tired of being broke."

"Sure." Cole walked over and clapped him on the elbow with one hand while shaking hands with the other. He winked and grinned. "Well, you put up one hell of a fight on the side of the poor and needy down at Mascalero, I'll say that for you. By the way, did you keep tab on those

nesters you helped in gobbling up that Rocking R range? Hear another crop of nesters showed up and started to squeeze *them.* I suppose they said, 'Come thou and take, for there's aplenty.' "

"Don't rub it in, Cole."

HE LAUGHED, said, "All right," and shook hands with Hernandez and Big Jim.

It would be easy to like Cole, Pecos was thinking. Easy until you met his eyes. Somehow those pale, deadly eyes changed everything.

Big Jim said in his unexpectedly high-pitched voice, "Well, what about those nesters? What *did* they do?"

Cole said, "What do you suppose? Took to shooting. In the back. Sure, those cold meat notches. That's something the Rocking R never did. They went out and hired some guns, but they never got 'em in the back."

Pecos spoke with a knife edge tone creeping in, "Don't try to rub it in."

"All right. Water over the falls." Addis sat down on the plank bench, crossed his legs, brushed a bit of pine needle off his cross-weave pants. The ends of his heavily weighted holsters, resting on the bench, made the butts of his Colts tilt outward.

Speaking to Big Jim he said, "Pecos and me were on opposite sides all through the Bloody Clayton. We didn't start out top hands in that fracas, but we ended thataway. They killed Boze McClure and we got Tall Charley Clayton. After that, Pecos and me had the tinhorns in Mascalero laying money which would walk and which would be carried when we run head on, but the Army showed up and it never happened."

He stood, and leaned over to light his burned-out cigarette from the grease lamp. The flame, shining close, took all the handsomeness from his face, making it big boned, deep cleft and coppery. "And now we're partners. All bets are off. Nobody'll ever know."

As Addis stood up Pecos caught the faint hint of perfume. Addis wasn't the type who used the stuff. Perhaps he'd carried it out from some place like the National, only this wasn't the rank stuff you'd find in a house like that. It was New Orleans, it was French.

Cole was watching him, his pale eyes intent. "Well, Pecos, what do you think of our spread?"

"If I was a vigilante captain with thirty men at my back I'd come down on you tonight and wipe you out."

"The same old Pecos! Listen, if you were a vigilante captain headed here you'd have a bullet through your heart before you got out of Butte. We're big, Pecos. We're big and getting bigger. That's why we need men like you. Man with officer's training. Man good enough to be major under Beauregard."

"Johnston."

"All right, then, Johnston. What's less important than the name of a defeated general?"

It always angered William Calhoun Warren—the Pecos Kid—when anyone made light of the Confederacy. His eyes hardened as he said, "Maybe a defeated road agent. They don't even get time to take their boots off."

Addis said, "You should know." He threw his cigarette away after taking only two puffs off it. "It's hot in here. Let's walk somewhere. Couple of things I'd like to take up with you."

IT WAS sunup with a rough-looking gunman crew straggling out for grub-pile when Pecos and his two companions found some unused bunks and spread their blankets.

When they were alone in the long, dim room, Big Jim leaned out of his bunk and said, "What'd Cole Addis have to say?"

"Matter of business. I'm in for a

double share, with you and Butch good for one apiece. I'll tell you all about it after while."

Pecos lay back with his eyes closed, but sleep was a long way off. His mind kept sorting the hints he'd received. He was now quite certain that neither Cole Addis nor Ed Roe were top men in the business. It was a matter of scope. This was bigger than highway robbery. He had a hunch they were out to bankrupt the McCabe Company, another hunch someone was out to control Butte City, and through that the mines on The Hill.

Big Jim was snoring, but he knew by the frequent complaint of bunk boards that Hernandez was as wide awake as himself.

"Butch," he said.

"Yes, Keed?"

"What do you think of Butte Hill?"

"Those four-beet silver mines? Poof!"

"If the Northern Pacific ever gets rails through this country those four-bit mines as you call 'em might go up to a dollar."

"Listen to me. Gold, that is good. But silver—I will tell you about silver. In Chihuahua my uncle Bolivar Garcia de Santiago Feunte, he own the silver mine. *Plata Grande,* so he call it. Now, to work the mine which is the biggest in all the Conchos River country, my uncle used peons, half to dig the ore and half to grow food, so that all the labor costs him nothing.

"The powder for blasting, the mules, the steel—these he receives free from the army through good connections in the government. Only for the arrastres must he buy a little quicksilver, and yet at mining silver has my uncle Bolivar gone flat broke and must flee the country for his debts. No, Señor Keed. If they dig silver on Butte Hill, then I say, Pack up and go for the town is a ghost camp already."

"Hear they hit sooty copper on the four hundred foot level of the Anaconda."

"Copper? What fool talk is thees? Rather would I have one silver peso than two pounds of copper." He leaned far out of the bunk so he could look down in Pecos' face while he talked. "Listen. In Miles City there was tinhorn selling stock in London and Butte Consolidated Mines. Today is thees company bankrupt like my uncle Bolivar. Always the big stock issue, big talk, and poof! Rather would I invest my dollars in the bonds of the Confederate States of America."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Big Take

DURING the easy days that followed, Pecos found the road agents to be a careless, lawless lot, apparently little different from the run of men one would find at some roundup camp. An exception was Owen Peck, a swaggering, adenoidal man who claimed twelve notches for his low-slung guns.

And then there was The Turk, who was not a Turk but a negroid Spanish Indian, massive and squat with gold rings in his close-set ears; and there was Mutt Frye, a drunken, filthy little man who bragged about the dead men who dotted his backtrail.

Each morning one could sit and hear the distant cracking of Owen Peck's guns up one of the gulches as he practiced draw and shoot, draw and shoot for fifty cartridges.

Pecos, sprawled in the shade of the bunkhouse, said to Orofino Johnny, "Hear him talk he's so good he don't need that."

"He's nuts." Johnny had a nice, smiling way about him. He was just too lazy to work, and so he had become successively a gambler, and a road agent. "All he talks about is kill. All he thinks about. He'd rob coaches at a dollar a night, just

for the willin' chance he gets. Me—once I get a six-eight thousand dollar stake, I'll quit road agentin' for good. Fifty dogies, a log shack and a young squaw, that's all I'd want. Wouldn't even carry a gun. I ain't mad at nobody."

They all disliked and feared Owen Peck—feared him the way they'd fear a rattlesnake in the dark.

Each night a smudge fire burned to drive away the mosquitoes that hatched by thousands in the grassy overflow of some beaver dams down the valley. Pecos watched Owen Peck shamble toward the bunkhouse and said to Hernandez, "He likes me."

"*Si.* Always the beeg, buck-tooth smile. But does he smile at your back?"

"He's segundo to Addis and figures I'm pressing him. He'll take some watching, that one."

Cole Addis had gone somewhere. About sundown on the sixth day he came back. Passing Pecos on his way up from the corral he said, "Come around after grubpile, there's something I'd like to talk about."

When Pecos went to see him, Owen Peck was slouched in a chair, grinning with his loose mouth, listening to some story Cole Addis was telling.

Addis stopped talking, and moving with big, easy grace, stood, got down a bottle of whiskey and poured some drinks. He never did continue the story, if indeed he intended to, for at that moment Tom Little clumped in, cursing, bringing with him the smell of horses.

He said, "That bay sprung a shoe and the nail galled hell out of him. Now what'll I do? It takes a real horse to carry me."

With the exception of Big Jim Swing, Tom Little was the biggest man in camp.

Addis said, "Take that big dapple white."

"And get shot?"

"Oh, hell, we won't have trouble." He handed Pecos a drink. In case you haven't guessed, we got something cooking. Wagon outfit. McCabe. Swansea stuff."

Most Montana silver mines hand-sorted their richest ore, sacked it, wagon freighted it to Salt Lake City, shipped it on by rail to San Francisco, and thence, around the Horn by sailing ship, to Swansea in Wales, the nearest smelter capable of recovering the metal from its complex chlorides and sulphates.

"You got a smelter now?" Pecos asked him.

"To hell with the ore. McCabe's been hiding gold and silver ingots in those sacks instead of making express shipments by coach."

"You'll be breaking McCabe." When Addis shrugged, he said, "Ever hear of the goose and the golden egg?"

"Sure, but as long as the rich diggings hold out we'll hatch new geese faster'n we can kill off the ones."

IF THE Pecos Kid had wanted to carry a warning to McCabe, he wouldn't have had the chance. At midnight every man except the cook was saddled and ready to go. There was a slight delay while Chevalier and Jim Flynn came with a remuda of extra horses, and that was Pecos' first hint of the long ride they were in for.

Cole Addis, a fine figure on horseback, set out in the lead, traveling swiftly but not too swiftly, steadily, through mountains, and as the morning sun grew hot, through rocky, sage-covered hills.

They crossed the stage road. The rain of a week before had dried off. North of them, a fine haze of dust hung in the air. It was the train of ore wagons.

Addis stopped where the road twisted through ridge-reefs of reddish volcanic rock. His plan was simple. The wagon train would be cut in half by some narrows, and they'd surprise the forward

wagons while holding off the ones in the rear.

It was pitifully easy. Mules and drivers were tired after the long, dusty drag. Ore wagons, two in tandem making up each unit, were pulled by long jerkline strings of mules. It scattered them, and as some lagged while others went on, they became further scattered. When the attack came, the lead drivers were subdued before those in the drag knew what the firing was about.

Pecos rode back and saw one of the teamsters down on his face in the sagebrush. A masked road agent was just riding away. Owen Peck.

Big Jim had seen it happen. Cursing, he jerked his carbine from the saddle scabbard, but Pecos jerked it out of his hand.

"You see what he did?" Jim cried.

"Yes, but it's too late to help the teamster, and there'll be time to take care of Peck."

"I'll do it now." He was trying to get by, and Pecos kept turning his horse, crowding him into the rocks. "You get out of my way, Kid. I'll snap his neck."

Hernandez came alongside then and got hold of Big Jim's bridle, and they calmed him down. By then, with Tom Little bellowing orders, the teamsters were lined up, disarmed, rifles taken from the wagons. As darkness settled the wagon train was moved forward three quarters of a mile to a cutbank drop-off where one after another the ore sacks were slit open, and dumped.

The work continued by the light of pitch torches. The Salt Lake coach rolled up, was stopped by four masked men, robbed, and kept waiting.

No ingots were discovered, and now it was apparent that Cole Addis hadn't expected any. Chevalier and a couple of others drove the mules off to be sold at the Idaho gold camps, a four-day trip across the mountains. The raid had netted little else of value.

One after another the empty wagons were rolled over the cutbank to smash themselves among massive boulders at the bottom. Still not satisfied, he had Matt Frye waiting to set fires at half a dozen places along the broken heap as it accumulated.

At last, at midnight, they headed back. It was a relief for Pecos to get the mask and blanket off. He was tired. The whole business had left a rotten taste in his mouth. He licked his lips. They were salty from sweat and he spat it out.

He noticed without turning that Cole Addis had ridden up beside him.

Pecos said, "Hell of a trip for no money. How much did you lift off that coach?"

"Watches, poor scratch. You need money, Pecos? I'll see that you get money. More'n you got off that coach you robbed in Bird Tail Gulch. This is big, Pecos, like I told you. All you need to do is take orders."

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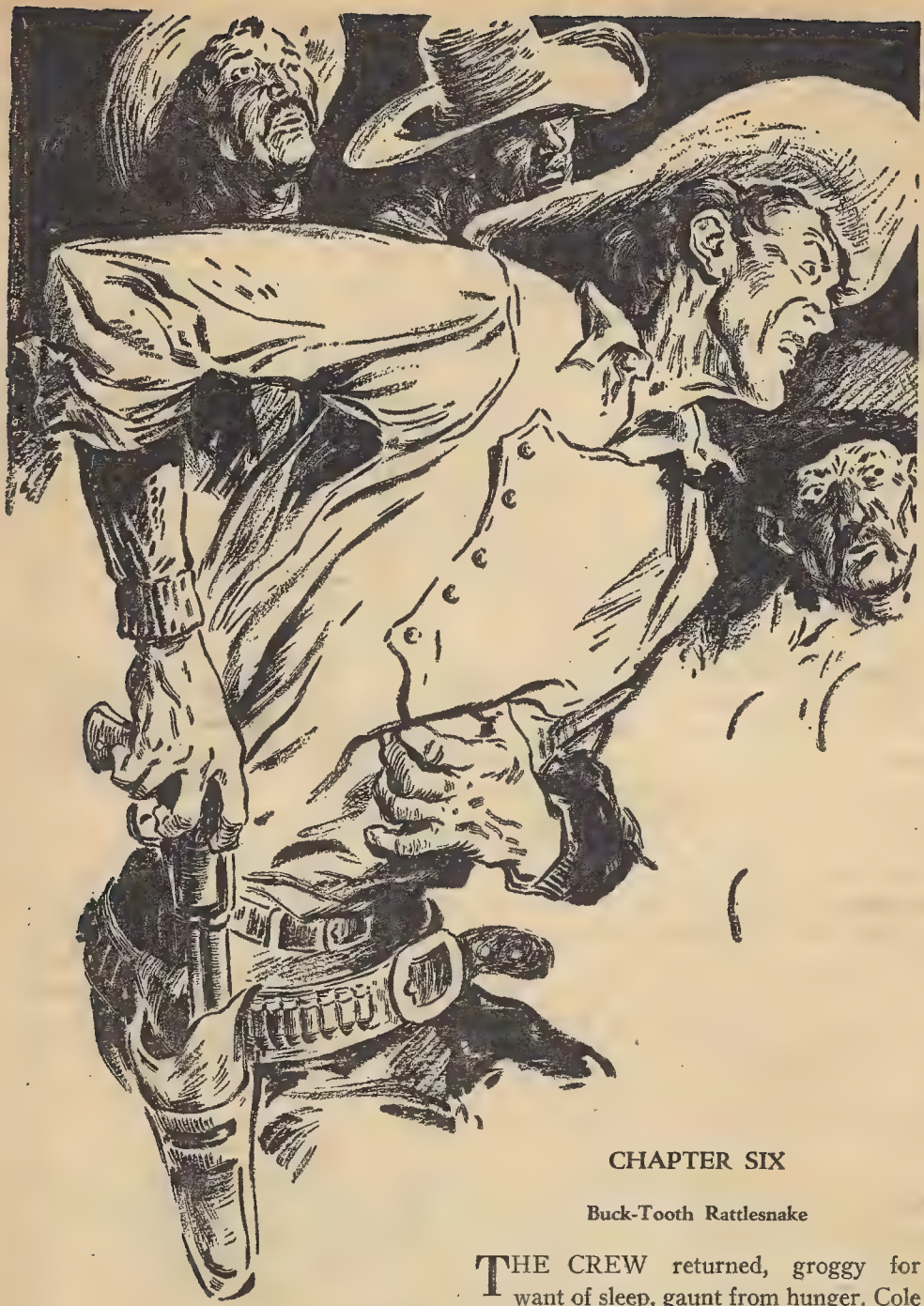

Orofino was knocked back. His gun half cleared the holster.

CHAPTER SIX

Buck-Tooth Rattlesnake

THE CREW returned, groggy for want of sleep, gaunt from hunger. Cole Addis managed a side-of-the-mouth joke, limped stiffly to the ammunition room, unlocked it, and got out a couple gallons of Kentucky forty rod. The stuff, hitting empty stomachs, had an instantaneous

warming, unsteadying effect on them all.

Addis didn't drink, himself. He stood with one boot propped behind him on the split-pine bench that ran along the front of the square house, the perpetual cigarette dangling from his handsome mouth, one eye closed against the smoke. Behind him, a gangling figure with guns tied to his skinny legs, was Owen Peck —*Fishface* they called him to his back, but never to his face.

Half an hour and five drinks later found Hernandez whanging his guitar and half the outlaw crew singing the endless, bawdy verses alternating with,

"Before I'd live a cowboy's life
I'd shoot myself with a butcher knife,
I'd part my hair with a wagon wheel
And die with cactus in my heel."

Orofino Johnny came up behind Pecos, clapped him on the back, and said, "You better have another before it's all gone. This likker's all the pay we're getting."

"I hear different."

"Sure, you hear different and you hear the truth." He was loud. Whiskey made him swagger. He was a good lad but he'd never learned to keep his mouth shut. "You ever hear of old Daddy Christmas? If the stagecoach pickings are bad, old Daddy Christmas comes around. Daddy Christmas from Butte City. We do him a favor, and he does us a favor—"

"Johnny!" Addis was no longer slouched. He'd moved away from the bench. He stood with his legs spread, his hands dangling, his shoulders sloped forward.

Orofino heard him and laughed. "Yep, old Daddy Christmas! What the hell? We all know what goes on here."

"Johnny!"

This time his voice had a knife steel quality that cut through the fog of alcohol in Orofino Johnny's brain. He turned, recognized Addis' posture, the look in his pale eyes. He realized what was coming. He tried to jerk the gun at his hip. He was no match for Addis.

Addis looked slow, but the guns were there, in his hands, as though from nowhere. There was a fragmentary hesitation. Then they exploded in unison.

Orofino was knocked back. It was as if he'd been hit by a sledge. His gun had half cleared its holster. It flew in one direction and he fell in the other. He was dead, slumped forward with one leg bent under him when he hit the ground.

Addis had moved back with the recoil. He stood against the log wall. Smoke strung up from the twin muzzles. There was no change in his face. His pale eyes missed nothing.

Men had stopped singing. There were shouted questions, then silence. Sight of Orofino's body stunned them.

Addis spoke in a clear, biting voice, "He talked too much. I don't want men around me who get drunk and talk too much."

Owen Peck had moved inside. Pecos could barely see him. He was waiting in there with both guns drawn.

Pecos turned his back and walked toward the bunkhouse, meeting Big Jim on the way down.

"Come along," he said. "We don't want any hand in this."

PECOS slept most of the day. He got up, walked barefoot to the creek for a drink, and went back to his bunk again. Hernandez was awake above him. He leaned out to say:

"Did I hear right when Cole Addis said the tinhorns of Mascalero made *even money* bets who would be carried out when you met face to face? Can it be that you have grown slower through the years?"

"To hell with you." Pecos tried to sleep, but the picture remained—that backward bend of Addis' shoulders, the easy twist and lift of his hands, the brief hesitation, the twin guns blazing, all so casual and yet so deadly swift. Swift as he'd ever seen. He wondered and kept wondering whether he himself was that fast, whether he had ever been that fast.

He got up when the cook banged his tin bucket in grub call. Afterward, through long twilight, he sprawled by the smudge fire, slapping mosquitoes, listening to the lazy voice of a dirty red-whiskered road agent called Tobaccomouth Billy recounting the doings of ghosts in the "ha'nted" houses back in Pike County, Missouri, where he'd lived "befoah the wah" as all time was divided in the lives of the men of the 'seventies.

Owen Peck came and almost immediately men started getting up, stretching themselves, and wandering off to the bunkhouse. Only Pecos and Tobaccomouth remained.

Peck hunkered himself, picked at his big teeth with a grass spear, and tossed it away to say smugly, "Notice they all pull their saddles when I come around? They don't hanker to be number thirteen."

Pecos asked politely, "What do you mean, seh?"

"I mean none of 'em want to be the thirteenth notch on my guns."

"I doubt anything like that was in their minds. I'd bend to the belief that they just don't like the smell of snake."

Owen Peck froze a little. He was still smiling as he stood up. Flames, breaking through the green spruce branches lighted his face, brought a glisten from the saliva at one corner of his mouth. Pecos still

appeared indolent, but he'd turned a trifle, freeing the gun at his right hip. He kept picking up little bits of ground litter and tossing them at the fire.

The silence had grown rather tense. Then there was a boot thud of someone coming down from the bunkhouse, and Hernandez spoke with soft music in his voice,

"Señor Peck. Look. There is even now a rattlesnake behind your heel and you will be stepping on it."

Peck spun and looked down. "Where?"

"There!"

HERNANDEZ carried his gun high, at the center of his abdomen, its butt pointed toward his right hand. He drew with a hooking, Spanish cross-draw—the draw that those Chihuahua aristocrats learn as soon as they are big enough to lift a gun's three pounds of weight.

The gun exploded as he swept it back. By darkness its streak of flame marked the course of the bullet downward. It struck Peck's left bootheel just as he was moving with his weight on it. It tore the heel to shreds and left him fighting for balance.

"One hundred pesos!" Hernandez cried.

It was a thing they'd done before. Pecos was on one knee. There was a laugh on his lips, a wild light in his eyes.

"Called!" he drew and fired on the word, his bullet smashing the opposite heel, leaving Peck sprawled back on the ground.

He'd instinctively drawn. At five steps it was an easy shot for Hernandez who blew the gun out of his hand. Pecos' next shot rolled the gun over amid a geyser of dirt, but in the darkness Hernandez's third bullet missed.

"Decision!" Pecos cried.

"Alas," Hernandez said sadly, "I am in your debt still another hundred pesos."

Peck was rolling on the ground, holding the hand the gun had been shot from, his teeth bared from pain. He had no wound, but the bullet, striking close to his hand, was like being hit by a hammer.

Men were stampeding down from the bunkhouse, but Hernandez paid no attention to them. Crouched by the fire with a little, black notebook, he wet a stub pencil and painstakingly inscribed a figure, drew a line added a total.

"Alas, has anyone been tail over teakettle in debt like your poor Hernandez? Debt, debt, debt—thees awful burden. Do you know, Señor Keed, that to you alone I owe in debts the sum of fifty-four thousand four hundred five dollar and seex beets?"

Pecos watching the road agents, said, "You give me that gunpowder roan horse of yours and we'll call it square."

"No. To the Gonzales, the Feunte and the Flanagan is a debt sacred. Listen while I swear that these moneys I will owe you to the end of time."

Cole Addis pushed his way through the crowd that had gathered. He saw what had happened, laughed, turned his back on Owen Peck, and said to Pecos:

"I always heard that fellow was Greaser-fancy with a gun, but he's started something now. Don't blame me if one of these days he isn't around when the supper bell rings."

"Thanks." Pecos raised his voice so he'd be sure Owen Peck would hear. "If he gets shot in the back, I'll know who to kill."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Idaho Kid

IT WAS past midnight. The Pecos Kid awakened suddenly and sat up. He walked through the bunkhouse, among snoring men, and stood in the door. He didn't know what had awakened him. It

could have been some unexpected sound, or only a hunch.

A horse snorted and made a galloping round of the corral. There was a slight thud as the gate pole was dropped back in place. Half a minute later he saw the rider leaving, dark silhouetted against the mountainside.

It was Cole Addis. Someone was up there, waiting. He heard the single note of a voice, a hint of laughter, and the click of hoofs moving through shadow along the rocky trail, down-valley.

Pecos dressed, hurried to the pasture, caught his horse. He mounted and rode bareback for a mile.

He stopped. The night was cool and still. The moon kept emerging from among clouds and disappearing again. He let his horse drift along for another half mile, then he pulled in on the rope hackamore, realizing that someone was quite close.

Two riders, moving slowly, had passed below him. He had a glimpse through timber. One was Addis, the other looked dark and short.

They didn't reappear. Thinking they'd stopped somewhere at the foot of the slope, he dismounted, descended, found no sign of them. Returning to his horse he saw the stranger, alone striking back down the valley.

Three miles off the trail would cross a saddle in the ridge. He rode at a hard gallop, cross-valley, and straight up the ridge. There he left his winded horse and started down, digging his boot heels against the steep descent.

The rider was there, suddenly, right below him. Rocks dislodged by his boots, spilled downward. The rider suddenly reined in, and he could hear a girl's voice:

"Who's there?"

She'd whipped out a gun. Moonlight made a flash on one of the surface of its nickeled, octagonal barrel. It was aimed upward at him, the hammer was rocked back, her finger was clenched too firmly around the trigger.

"Cole sent me." He said the first thing he could think of that would stop her from shooting.

Her hand relaxed a little. She was trying to see him. She was so close he could smell her perfume—the same perfume he'd noticed on Addis that first night. He got halfway to his feet, grabbed hold of an exposed root with his left hand, and leaning far out from the bank, grabbed her wrist.

She'd imagined herself at a safe distance. She didn't realize what had happened until he'd thrust the gun high. It exploded, whipping lead and powderflame over his head. Her horse pivoted in the narrow trail and lunged downhill. She fell, and Pecos, still holding her wrist, fell with her, through ferns and tendrils to the trail.

The gun was gone. He lay, his weight holding her down, while dirt showered over them.

SHE WAS baffled for a few seconds, then she twisted and clawed at him with catlike fury. He got hold of her hands. He forced them down, one at each hip, and held her while she twisted and kicked at him. Finally she stopped. She was sobbing through clenched teeth, from fury rather than terror.

Her hat had fallen off. Her dark hair had come loose and lay in wavy masses about her face, over her slim shoulders. She wore a man's shirt—in the struggle its top button had popped off revealing a bit of white lace, and her breathing threatened to pop the other buttons off as she panted from the struggle she was putting up.

Still holding her wrists, he got to one knee. She wore trousers. They were made for a boy. They were too large around the waist and they fit her too tightly in the legs.

He asked, "Who are you?"

"That's none of your affair!"

"Why were you up here seeing Cole Addis?"

She breathed and looked at him. She twisted her lips down at the corners. "Why shouldn't I?"

When Pecos looked at Cole Addis, all he could see were those pale killer's eyes. A girl might see something else. Addis was so handsome—so tall, broad, swaggering handsome.

He looked around, saw her gun, released her and picked it up in the same second. It was a rimfire Army .32. He ejected the cartridges, and tossed the gun back to her. She was sitting up, rubbing her bruised wrists. She let the gun lie across her thighs.

"You're the Pecos Kid!"

She laughed at the surprise on his face and said, "I know something else. You're the one who robbed that McCabe coach on Bird Tail Pass. Cole says you used to be a regular sky-pilot fighting on the side of the weak and shiftless, and now you've turned out to be a coach robber. What made you change?"

Pecos thought it over and drawled, "Why, I guess Cole was flattering me. I never looked up a man's church standing before I sided one way or the other. What Cole really meant was that he rode on the side paying the most money while I just took the side where I had the most fun."

The answer delighted her. She rammed the gun back in its holster and stood to face him. "You mean you've done all you have just for the fun of it?"

"Maybe that's a hard thing for you to believe."

"No, it isn't." She'd got over her anger. A new type of excitement filled her. "I wish I were a man. I *do.*"

"All right, say you're a man. Then what?"

"I'd ride, and rob, and I'd throw it away. I'd travel from Canada to Mexico and back again."

"If you were a *man* you'd do those things."

"Yes."

"Down in Deadwood I knew a gal that did them things anyhow."

"And I would, too. I asked Cole to ride with his gang."

"And Cole said, No, no, little girl, so you minded him."

He'd intended to bring her anger up a little in the hope she'd talk and reveal her identity, but her emotions lay primitively close to the surface, and she cried:

"No, I didn't *mind* him. I could ride with him and rob with him any time I chose."

He waited for her to go on, but she'd checked herself. He said, "Well, why don't you?"

"You're daring me?"

He changed his tactics. He didn't want her riding back to Cole Addis and making trouble. "No, I'm not daring you."

She forked back her thick, dark hair and whispered, "You were. You were daring me. You don't think I'd have the nerve."

THREE days passed. The Pecos Kid, returning through late twilight from a horse hunt up the valley found Tom Little waiting to talk with him near the corral.

"Confab," Little said, jerking his head at the square house. They walked up the path together. "Got a new recruit. Don't ask too much about him. Boss seems to be touchy."

"Thanks."

The door was closed, an unusual precaution on a warm evening, and Owen Peck lounged with a cigarette dangling in a loose lower lip. His right hand was still bound with rags torn from an old shirt, advertising that it was sprained from having the gun shot away.

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"How's the flipper, Peck?" Pecos asked with mock solicitude.

"It's comin' around."

Pecos laughed and followed Little inside. He closed the door with his heel and saw the new recruit seated in shadow by the far wall.

The girl. He should have guessed, but her being there came as a surprise.

She'd cut off her hair, or else she'd braided it, and bound it tightly beneath her black sombrero. Hiding her forehead and nose was a molded, black silk mask. She wore boots, trousers, a shirt and a beaded buckskin jacket. At first glance she looked like a boy, but it's almost impossible for a woman to effectively masquerade herself in cowboy's range clothes.

She saw him and leaned forward, her lips were parted a trifle, he could see the throb of excitement in her throat. To hide any surprise on his face, Pecos leaned over the lamp and risked burning his cheek to get the stub of his cigarette lighted.

He said, talking cigarette smoke from the side of his mouth, "Who's your new man, Cole? The mysterious one all fixed up for some kind of masquerade ball?"

Addis didn't like the remark, and the lean set of his chin showed it. "The Idaho Kid wears a mask all the time. Any objections?"

"No-o. I don't give an unholy damn if your Idaho Kid goes around in his nightgown with dinglebobs on his toes. Well, what's up? Another ore train? If it is, you'd better spot me my shells before we start. I didn't get gunpowder money out of that last one."

Addis' big shoulders tightened the material of his shirt, then he decided to laugh. "What you been doing, spiking your coffee with vinegar?" He walked in his stiff, cowboy manner to the cupboard, got out three little buckskin sacks. They made a solid, jingling thump as he dropped them on the table. "Here's some pay-off for you and your pards. The big cut yours, or divide as you want. Don't say anything outside. I haven't cut all the way yet."

Pecos held the gold pokes in his two hands appraising their good sixty ounces of weight.

"Funny, I didn't see this heavy color come off the wagons."

"Neither did Orofino Johnny that I was telling you about."

Pecos took the hint and let the matter drop. He sat with his bootheels on the edge of the table, hat shading his eyes, and listened while Addis outlined a plan for robbing a McCabe coach headed for Three Forks.

"If it was me," Pecos said, "I'd let McCabe rest a while and take one of Ben Fillmore's coaches." From the corner of his gaze he noticed that Ben Fillmore's name made her flinch. He went on blowing ash off his cigarette, examining the coal. "Yeah, I'd take on that Ben Fillmore." She didn't flinch that time. She was leaning forward, watching him. "I hear he's big shakes and growing bigger. Hear he's buying options on half the mines on The Hill. Out to control Butte like he controls Last Chance. Must be a man that rich sends *something* out on his stagecoaches."

Addis said with unexpected heat, "Fillmore's not in the gold exchange business at all."

"Maybe not, but—"

"What you got on your mind?" Addis pushed himself back from the table. "If you got any idea about taking this gang over—"

"I wouldn't be talkin' to you about it if I did."

Addis took a deep breath. "Well, maybe we will take on Ben Fillmore when we grow up to his size. But tomorrow it's the McCabe coach. McCabe keeps buying gold, and he gets it through. I

have a hunch he makes a big gamble just once in a while, sending it out in the coach we'd least expect. So we'll take a look at that coach heading for Three Forks."

THEY left a couple of hours before daylight—those in the room together with Hernandez, Owen Peck, and Tobacco-mouth Billy. At a switchback leading down toward the stage road the girl managed to delay and come up beside Pecos who was riding last in line.

With the others dropped over the rim from sight, she said,

"So you thought I wouldn't have the nerve."

"Why, you sure enough do have some influence over Cole."

His tone made her hands tighten on the bridle. She whispered through tense lips, "Maybe I'm in love with Cole. Maybe I'd follow him to hell and back. Maybe I'll just take off my mask, and let my hair down, and we can ride together, Cole and I. What are you laughing about, anyway?"

"I wasn't. I was just thinking. I guess you don't know what a rough bunch of boys they got holed up yonder. Six or eight of 'em as tough as Cole Addis. They follow him now because there's always money to go around. But a woman like you is different. You don't go around. You belong all to one or all to another. That means trouble."

Their horses, jostling on the narrow turn, had brought them close together. He seized her by the arm, turned her and with sudden strength drew her hard against him and kissed her. He kept her there for a moment.

She twisted to get away. He held her. Then when he turned her free, he found she was not struggling any more. She was breathing as she had that night along the trail.

She whispered, "He'd kill you if he saw you do that."

"Why don't you call him?"

"Maybe I will."

"Like you told him about meeting me before?"

She wheeled her horse then and rode down the switchback where Cole and the others had stopped to wait. She did not turn around at all but went right on.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Deadfall

THE Three Forks coach was loaded with Army officers headed back to Fort Henderson after a celebration in Butte City. The coach did not even carry a strongbox, and the only express shipment was a bag of repair parts for a sawmill at Bozeman. Addis' hunch had been wrong.

The girl left them somewhere along the way. After a day in camp, Addis left, too. He returned from Butte, smelling of barbershop pomade, and immediately called Pecos, Hernandez and Big Jim to the square house. McCabe, he said, was most certainly getting his major gold shipments out, and he wanted the three of them to spend some time in Butte to unearth what facts they could.

In the meantime he intended to stop the Salt Lake coach at Big Hole, just for luck. If anything they learned in Butte indicated that to be unwise, the gang was to be informed at Stonehouse.

They approached Butte cautiously, but there was no trouble. That night, when McCabe went to his office after watching the arrival of his Benton coach, he found Pecos waiting for him.

"I'd begun to wonder what'd happened to you," he said, sitting down and looking at his big-knuckled hands. "You better do something pretty quick or there'll be no McCabe Company to pay you off."

"Hold tight for a couple more weeks. There's a big fat man at the head of that gang, and he's trying to put you out of business. Who'd want to do that? Fillmore, maybe?"

"With the N.P. due to shove rails through here in a year, or two at the most, Fillmore wouldn't go to the bother. He's more interested in getting hold of those silver veins up on The Hill."

"They don't rob *his* coaches."

"They don't want to antagonize him. You got it in your head this is bigger than it is. You should have informed me of that attack on the wagon train. I'd have ambushed them and wiped them out."

"You'd have ambushed 'em and got a few, and there'd be more to take their place. Never any shortage of road agents. They got their eyes on the Salt Lake coach tomorrow, too, but a deadfall would get you nowhere. Just keep the gold off it. When the chance comes we'll bust that gang wide open, but the chance isn't now."

There was someone outside the door. "Gloria?" McCabe said, and opened the door admitting his daughter. She was the same slim, blonde girl he'd glimpsed that first night. "This is the Pecos Kid."

"Yes, I know."

"He tells me the Lodgepole Gang is out to rob our Salt Lake coach tomorrow."

She cried, "Then we'll have something fixed up for them."

"No," said Pecos, "you won't."

"Why?"

"They'll know who tipped you off, and I'll be a dead man with a couple of dead friends. And where'll you be? Any better off than before? I doubt it."

She showed her temper. "You're not telling us what to do!"

"No, you can do as you like. But if you make a deadfall of that Salt Lake coach I want to know it now, because me and the boys'll be heading over the hill."

"You threatened that before."

"It wasn't a threat, it was a promise."

HE LEFT with Pat's grudging assurance that he'd send the coach through the same as ever, but he kept watch the next day to make sure. It left with its usual load of passengers and one shotgun guard.

Returning to the hangout they found two-thirds of the men there, drunk and

quarreling, with a dead man on his face near the corrals. Mutt Frye and a renegade Cheyenne named Joe Buffalo were holed up in the root cellar, and most of the others were shooting at them.

In a while the shooting stopped with a third of the men laid out from whiskey

The Idaho Kid

and the others gathered around a saddle-blanket where The Turk took them on at three-card monte. The dead man, an Australian called Pink, lay forgotten by the corral.

Pecos came up and said, "You better bury him."

An Army deserter named Thomas turned and said, "If you want him buried, bury him yourself." Then he saw who it was and it sobered him. "Oh, Pecos. I didn't notice."

"The hell you say! I ain't taking your orders any more'n—"

"You kill him, Mutt?" Pecos cut in.

"He was askin' for it."

"Then bury him."

Mutt got to his feet, cursing under his breath, and did as he was told.

Night settled. Hernandez said, "You figure Cole will have his boys back tonight?"

"He might camp over at the Stonehouse."

At midnight Addis arrived with his beat-out crew—what was left of it. Pecos guessed what had happened the moment he saw Addis limping up on his horse-stiffened legs.

Addis stopped and said, "They were waiting for us. Eight or ten guns at the crossing. Did you know about it, Pecos?"

Pecos stood with his arms dangling ready to reach for the guns at his hips. He said in a low but very clear voice, "If you really believe that, the time to settle it is now."

For a second Addis seemed to be on the edge, then his manner told Pecos the danger had passed. "If I thought you knew you wouldn't have the chance to go for your guns." And he limped toward the house.

Pecos could see Chevalier, Peck, Jim Flynn and Halfpint Corruthers down by the corral. He thought of the girl, and it made him sick. "Where's Idaho?"

Addis stopped and turned as though he'd hit the end of a rope. "What do you care about Idaho?" he barked. Then he toned down, "Idaho wasn't along."

AT THE house Addis told him that Dutch Hank and Quinlin had been killed, and Tobaccomouth Billy, wounded too badly to ride, had been left at the Shoshone encampment near Stonehouse.

Addis fixed nim with a hard gaze and said, "How about that greaser pal of yours? I'd kill him if I thought he got drunk in Butte and talked too much."

"He didn't know you were taking that coach."

Two days later Tobaccomouth got to camp, hanging to his horse with a story of escaping from a roving group of Bannack vigilantes. More was heard of Ban-

nack vigilantes before the week was over.

With Addis on one of his extended absences, four men under Halfpint Corruthers, up to some private sluice robbery, were surprised on Coldwater Creek. Two of them were captured and hanged, but Halfpint and a young fellow named Nealy escaped by riding to the stronghold and getting help to fight the Bannack riders off at Breakback Ridge, five miles to the south.

When Addis returned he'd already heard of the ruckus. He sent for them, but Nealy, suspecting what was coming, managed to escape. Halfpint wasn't so fortunate. Owen Peck, firing from an arm rest between two poles of the corral, got him squarely between the shoulders as he galloped bareback up the trail.

Then Addis made a little speech. "Nobody's going to jeopardize the whole outfit for the sake of some two-bit sluice robbery. You all been getting paid. Now I have something big coming up. Something damned big. Maybe a couple thousand for every man in camp. How does that sound?"

That night Addis sat across the table from the Pecos Kid, a cigarette in his handsome mouth, and told him about it.

"I been in Benton. Got a line on McCabe up there. I was wrong about his gold shipments. He's been buying it and storing it. Now he's contracted with the Prentiss boat, *Sioux Chief*, to take three thousand ounces to St. Louis, and I have reason to think he'll ship that much with Dobbs-Henderson, too.

"He'll sneak it out on one of those slow freight outfits to Three Forks, and up to Benton the long way around by the Judith Gap. Let's see—this is Tuesday. It'll leave Butte Thursday morning. We'll nail it on the other side of the pass sometime late Thursday night or early Friday morning. The outfit will be pretty well gunned up, and we just lost four men. Where's Jim Flynn and Chevalier?"

"Out on a horse hunt."

He laughed from the side of his mouth. "Out on a sluice rob, you mean! Find them for me, can you?"

"I can try."

HE SENT Hernandez and Big Jim to look for them and rode to Butte City, The Hill among mines and prospect holes to the rear of McCabe's. There he waited for two hours for McCabe to return, and until long past midnight before he was alone.

McCabe's first words were in explanation of the ambush at Big Hole, saying it was his daughter's doing behind his back, but Pecos cut him off saying, "I'm alive," and going on to tell about the attack Addis had planned for Thursday night.

McCabe looked blank and said, "I'm sending no gold on that freight outfit. I'm storing it, that's true, but I'll send it out by coach as the insurance company specifies once the trails are safe."

Pecos stood outside with the raw, sulphide smell of the silver smelters on the wind around him, suspicious of Cole Addis, suspicious of McCabe.

He had the sudden feeling that someone was cached in the shadow, watching him. His right-hand gun had come to his hand without him thinking. Still holding it, he walked warily, watching the plank corral. The horses all bedded down. No alarm. It had been his imagination. No one had been shadowing him. He told himself that without being quite sure.

He rode back to the valley, getting there during the heat of afternoon. From the ridge he watched for a while. All seemed quiet. Monte game in progress by the bunkhouse. No one hailed him on his way to the corral. He turned his horse loose and started up the path. He noticed that every man at the monte game had turned to watch.

Alarm hit him like the buzz of a rattle-

snake. He spun around. There was Owen Peck inside the corral. The same as when he'd killed Halfpint. Rifle in one hand. The sun made a brassy shine on the breech plate.

Pecos walked on. The door to the square house was open. Addis, an indolent, graceful figure, was lounging there.

Addis spit out a stub of cigarette and said in his most pleasant voice, "Hello, Kid. Glad to see you back. Chev turned up right after you left. Guess you missed him. Come on in."

He hadn't seen Hernandez or Big Jim. Their favorite horses weren't around. He kept walking, knowing they could kill him any second they wanted. He went inside. The door hid his back from Peck's bushwhack gun. Sun flicker danced in his eyes. He realized that Addis wasn't alone. There are some men you don't have to see, and filthy Mutt Frye was one of them.

He was seated with a sawed-off double gun in his hands.

Mutt said, "Right at your belly, Kid. Ten chunks of number two buck. You get the latigos loose on them Colts and drop 'em so I won't have an excuse to saw you in half."

Pecos didn't ask what was wrong. He knew.

The two men watched him unbuckle his belts, saw the heavy holsters swing around his body. He let them thud to the floor.

Addis tilted a chair against the wall and regarded him with cold-eyed amusement. "Well, Kid, I hear you paid a visit to Butte last night."

"Yeah. I saw McCabe."

"What about?"

"I wanted to get a job gunning on that wagon train. It'd been handy for us."

"Sorry, Pecos. You haven't got the cards to bluff with. You're busted. Out of the game. *You* were the one that tipped them off about the Salt Lake coach. You should have pulled your picket pin and drifted. You were at the end of your luck and didn't know it."

PECOS recognized the futility of argument. Addis wasn't the type you talked out of things. He was no fool.

"Why didn't you have Peck shoot me in the back like he did Halfpint?"

"I'm not hot-headed, any more than you. I left that far behind me along the trail. If you were worth one cartridge more dead than alive, I'd have killed you. I didn't, and that means it's the other way around. You're worth more alive."

"Why?"

"Don't get impatient, Kid. You'll find out in time." He got up and walked to the door. "That is, you will unless you make Mutt spatter your insides around the room with that old double."

Addis didn't trust him alone with Mutt, for Owen Peck ambled in a couple minutes later to slouch in a chair by the wall.

"Where's Hernandez?" Pecos asked.

"That smart greaser?" Peck laughed with a slack sag of his jaw and spit in the direction of Pecos' boots. "You don't know where the greaser is? Remember to ask Cole when he gets back."

Cole Addis didn't return until almost dark. He smelled of fresh evergreen, so he'd been riding in the hills. Back of him was a halfbreed flunky carrying a couple dishes of venison stew, one for Pecos and one for Mutt Frye.

Pecos discovered he was ravenous. He ate half the plateful, boiling hot as it was, without pausing. Then he blew, and said, "Where's Hernandez and Big Jim?"

"Been wondering if they're worth more alive than dead, too? Sure they are. They're earning their keep. Sent 'em on a job of coach robbery." He smiled and added, "Fillmore coach, just like you suggested."

"Deadfall!" Pecos whispered.

"No-o. Not wham-bang from the cot-

tonwoods like you fixed up for me at the Big Hole crossing. Not that kind of deadfall. I'd rather have them taken alive."

"So that's it! You'll let the Butte vigilantes hang them."

"Not if they're smart, and not if you're smart. Why, Pecos, you three still got the world by the tail. You can still ride over the hill with a straight neck and no leaks. What's more, you can do it with some jingle in your pocket. The old heavy color. All you got to be is a little bit smart."

"Maybe you're getting some fun out o' talking in circles—"

"I'd like to tell you, Pecos, but that's not my job. There's a fellow in Butte City, that's *his* job. You eat up, and we'll have your horse saddled. We're ridin' there now."

CHAPTER NINE

The Big Boss

IT WAS late, but there was still no dawn in the sky. After long, hard riding they jogged through Butte's outlying cabins. Addis was in the lead with Pecos' horse on a lead string, then Frye with the sawed-off across the pommel, and a cautious thirty feet in the rear, Owen Peck.

Addis drew up between a stable and the abandoned shaft house of a silver mine and said, "Let's have the blindfold now, Owen."

Pecos made no comment as a black silk neckerchief was bound tightly around his eyes.

Peck said, "You try to pull that off and I'll bend a gun barrel over your head."

They rode past one turning and another, entered an alley, passed open doors from which poured the sounds of saloons and variety houses. The sound ended. They rode for a minute through a portion of town that seemed almost deserted, then they stopped and Addis said, "All right, here it is."

Pecos dismounted with Mutt Frye holding him by the arm. He was led through a door, up some deeply carpeted stairs, along a hall where the pressure of Frye's hand stopped him.

Addis rapped at a door and said, "It's me. I got him along."

A voice with an unfamiliar, deep resonance said, "It isn't locked. Come on in."

Pecos could see light around the blindfold. On the air were the odors of good cigars and good whiskey.

"Oh, you blindfolded him," the man said. "That was hardly necessary. I'm not anticipating trouble with Major Warren."

Pecos said, "I left that *Major* behind in '65. We'll just let it be the Pecos Kid if you don't mind."

"I don't mind."

Pecos pulled off the blindfold. He saw before him a man of fifty, short, bald and fat, but with an intelligent face, and a manner which showed he was used to command.

"You're Ben Fillmore," Pecos said.

He nodded, and they shook hands. His grip was unexpectedly powerful. "I regret this show of force, but it was your reputation that made it necessary. Did Addis explain the situation to you?"

"I understand that Flanagan and Jim Swing are out robbing one of your coaches, and that it'll be a deadfall."

"Deadfall? Well, it *will* contain some duly elected officers of the law, but unless our plans miscarry, no one will be hurt. Your friends of course will be taken in the act of robbery, and it would be in the power of Judge Cullabine to order a trial, but I doubt things will get that far."

He started looking around the room which was a combination parlor and office, about twenty feet square with heavy furniture. After pawing several drawers he shouted, "Matthew! Where are those de-

positions that Krause drew up for me?"

A THIN, gray man entered through a set of draperies and catfooted to a sideboard where he picked up a big, bulging envelope. He handed it to Fillmore and left without a word. Fillmore took from it some documents, unfolded the top one.

"This is for the Mexican. Yours is one of the others, but they're all substantially alike. Notarized, witnessed, all they lack are the signatures." Thumbing to the last pages he chuckled and said, "You are even, I see, represented by council."

"Mind if I look?"

"Oh by all means."

The deposition consisted of six minutely penned pages held by clasps along the top. A glance at the opening sentences of paragraphs told Pecos that it was a detailed confession.

I, Hernandez Pedro Flanagan . . . employed by Patrick F. McCabe, and The Three Forks Freight and Coach Company for the purpose of terrorizing competing stage and freight lines, especially the Diamond Bar Mercantile and Freight Co., and the various properties of the St. Louis and Montana Bank, or any other property of Benjamin W. Fillmore . . . did on the morning of July 18th feloniously stop the Last Chance coach near Corkscrew Turn on the Deer Gulch road for the purpose of . . .

He leafed on. The remainder of the deposition took the form of questions and answers, purporting to be put to Hernandez by a pair of lawyers named Krause and Woolsey, in the presence of a magistrate, Judge Andrew Cullabine.

He whistled a fragment of tune through his teeth and said, "Well, I'll be damned!" What looked like admiration showed in his eyes, but his mind was fixed on the fact that the deadfall had not yet been accomplished, nor would it be for a couple of hours, and if he had his freedom, and a good horse, there might yet be time.

He said, "There was some mention made of remuneration. You'd be giving us enough money to get out of the country?"

"Certainly. You'll find me practical in these matters. I thought perhaps two thousand for you, and a thousand for each of your pals."

"I assumed it'd be more." He was thinking it would make little difference to Fillmore, because once the papers were signed the lives of the three wouldn't be worth a Confederate two-dollar bill, anyhow. *Killed, trying to escape*—that would be it. "Mr. Fillmore, seh, you'll be wanting us to get a long way off. You make that eight thousand instead of four and let me divide it. Then I'll deal. *After* I see the boys, of course."

"You'll sign now."

FILLMORE'S tone made Owen Peek shift his position. He stood leaning against a leather-upholstered chair, his thumbs hooked in his cartridge belts. Mutt Frye had the sawed-off in the crook of his left arm. Addis was beyond a heavy mahogany table.

"Sign it?" Pecos said, his voice sounding loud in the dead quiet room. "I want to read it over first. All the way."

He discarded the two top depositions and took the third. The room was lighted by a three-burner kerosene lamp suspended on a counterbalance from the ceiling. He moved around so the light would shine on the paper. In doing it he passed behind Fillmore. It seemed natural enough.

Still making no sharp move he seized Fillmore by both arms, pulled him tight, and held him with his left arm crooked around his throat. Fillmore's hands were free. He tried to claw his way loose. He tried to cry out, but the sound was pinched in his throat. His right hand pulled his coat open. A gun was there, strapped high, gambler style, in a holster between his shoulder and his belt.

Pecos had expected the gun, but he

didn't know where it was. He let go with his right hand, grabbed Filmore's wrist, and the two reeled against the wall.

It had all taken only a couple of seconds. Cole Addis shouted a warning to his two gunmen not to shoot, and tried to get around the table, but in turning Fillmore had rammed the table, knocking it in front of him. It delayed him a couple of seconds, and by that time Pecos had the gun.

It was a European revolver of peculiar shape with a long trigger pull and no visible hammer. Pecos was baffled for an instant, seeking the correct grip. He dragged Fillmore along the wall, using him as a shield.

From the side of his gaze he saw old Matthew charge into the room clutching an old time Navy Colt in his two hands.

Pecos was a perfect target for the old man. He had no choice. With quick power, he flung Fillmore in that direction and fired at the suspension chain of the lamp.

With his own gun he'd have hit it, but the strange revolver's self-cocking mechanism threw him off.

A bullet tore past him. He fell away. The room rocked with concussion. He could feel the burn of flying powder. He was on hands and knees in the table's brief protection. From there he fired again at the lamp, hit the brass counterweight, sent the lamp clattering to the floor.

The chimneys were gone, but one of the wicks still burned. "The door!" Addis was shouting. "Forget that and cover the door." Pecos swung his arm in a horizontal arc and killed the flame. He rolled to his feet and tried to reach the draped doorway through which Matthew had entered.

He rammed against someone. The unexpected impact sent him reeling. He found himself against the wall with velvet drapes under his hands. He groped. Powdersmoke filled the room. It strangled him. He set his teeth, held his breath to keep from coughing.

He found the door. A light burned in the next room, but the drapes kept him from silhouetting himself. He slammed the door, and someone fired, driving splinters after him.

He was in a rather long, narrow room filled with ledgers. A row of windows along one side were covered by bars. He had to keep going. He lunged through a door and realized too late that he was in a sort of vault.

HE STARTED to turn back. He stopped with a trapped rat feeling. By dim light he saw a heavy oak door almost hidden by some filing cases. He dumped the cases out of the way, found the door locked.

He saw a bolt and pulled it. The door was bolted on the other side, too. He stepped back and drove his weight, shoulder first. The door held.

He drew back again, and checked himself as he heard a rattle on the far side. The door came open. Beyond lay a hall in semi-darkness.

He flattened himself in the door, expecting a red blaze of gunfire.

Nothing happened. The hall seemed deserted. Then he caught the scent of perfume. *Her* perfume.

He looked for her, but she wasn't there. A bracket lamp burned around a turning, and there were the stairs.

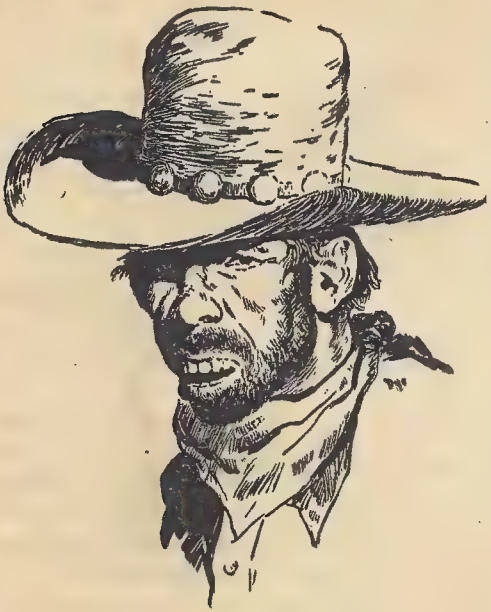
He went four at a time. The thick carpeting snagged a bootheel and he fell. He rolled to his feet, back against the door. He reached, opened it, and saw Owen Peck come in sight at the head of the stairs.

Peck took the first step before checking himself. He had a gun in each hand. He realized that Pecos was there and no longer running. He'd have dived for cover if he'd had a chance. The walls hemmed him in. He lived a long time in that frag-

ment of a second with his face turned sick slack from fear.

He fired both guns, but Pecos, aiming from the waist, was a quarter-second ahead. The European gun threw a heavy bullet. It hit Peck and smashed him backward. Peck's guns lashed the opposite walls, cutting plaster that rattled in a shower like stones.

He almost sat down, then his knees buckled and he caved in at the waist, pro-



Owen Peck

pelling him forward. He slid on his face, flopped over and over, ending head down, arms wide, on his back within two steps of the bottom.

One of his guns lay at Pecos' feet. He snatched it up. It seemed good to have one of Sam Colt's pieces in his hand again.

"Owen!" Cole Addis shouted.

Addis had been running. When no answer came, he stopped. "Owen!" he called in a different tone.

Still watching the stairs, Pecos retrieved the other Colt, unbuckled Peck's gun belts, strapped them on.

He could hear men shouting deep in the house. He backed outside. It was getting light. The scene was not as he'd pictured it. There was a large, Eastern style stable, some plank corrals. He started that way and saw the saddle horses tied beneath an ornate little open-sided shed.

He untied all of them, led them around the barn, around the corrals, down a terrace to a placer-pockmarked bench of Silver Bow Creek. A bullet struck the ground and screeched away, chased by the sharp pound of explosion. He was out of sight a second later, hidden by a high reef of gravel.

There he took time to look at the horses. It would be a long gallop to Deer Gulch where Hernandez and Big Jim were waiting for that Last Chance coach, and it wouldn't hurt to swap his weight from one horse to another along the way.

He chose Addis' big gray, and turned the other two loose.

Startled by the gunshot, a meadowlark veered, came to rest, and burst into song. It was a fine morning if William Calhoun Warren, the Pecos Kid, had been in a position to enjoy it.

CHAPTER TEN

Corkscrew Turn

HE RODE straight across Silver Bow, through ponds and tailing heaps, past the Star o' the West smelter, through suffocating white smoke where ore from the hardrock mines lay in long heaps mixed with pine logs, burning week after week, breaking down the "primaries," producing a dirt that could be handled by the charcoal blast furnace.

His trail sloped upward along the base of the mountains. Sulphur and arsenic from the roasting fires had already burned off every blade of grass in the great cup of the mountains that held the town. The evergreens had turned brown and dropped their needles. After a long climb he was

above the smoke haze and the air smelled good again.

He stopped and let his horse breathe. His eyes, narrowed and intent on the trails from town, picked up moving figures, horsemen—two of them, then three, then two more all on the gallop.

He watched them turn up the stage road. Even at a mile through the haze, he recognized the erect figure of Cole Addis, and the short, stooped lump that was Mutt Frye.

The three or four minute rest had helped. He decided not to swap his weight to the gray. He reached the stage road and turned along it as it made long, climbing loops along the mountain, then through the steep rock-slash of a gulch toward the Continental Divide.

Dawn was red. He kept going. Each time he looked back they'd be there, closing the distance. It had been a hard night for the buckskin, while they were mounted on fresh horses from Fillmore's stable.

Midway on a long, straight climb a bullet stung the rock ten feet above his head, and was chased by the sharp crack of explosion.

His experienced ear told him the gun was about three hundred yards away. He couldn't allow them to gain on him further, and yet the divide was still more than a mile away.

He couldn't swap horses there. He spurred the buckskin to a gallop as more bullets pursued him. Back of him six riders were strung out, forcing their horses. A seventh man had dismounted and was on one knee, aiming and firing a rifle.

Even when the distance increased to four hundred yards, the man kept arching the bullets in, hoping for a chance shot that would wound one of the horses, or frighten them, make them falter.

The road swung inward to a feeder gulch and back again. It brought his pursuers suddenly a hundred yards closer, across and below. Mutt Frye, getting his horse stopped was bent double, pulling a carbine from the saddle scabbard.

SHOOTING from the ground at that range Mutt would kill him. Pecos drew and fired. The bullet was close enough to send Mutt's horse in a rearing circle, then the ribbon turn that had carried them close pulled them at a distance again.

He could tell that the buckskin was about run out. The animal fantered and kept going. Stopping there would be suicidal, but the road plunged from view beyond a shoulder of rock about two hundred yards up the gulch.

Pecos talked to the buckskin, kept him going. It took the guts out of him to be cruel to a horse. He kept talking, watching the rock shoulder, watching the men behind him.

At last he was there. The sharp turning hid him. He slid off, turned the buckskin free, tied the gray to some washed-out roots of a pine tree.

With a gun in each hand he aimed a volley down the road, driving men off their horses to scramble back to any cover they could find. The answer came in a hail of lead that pounded the rocks in front of him.

He mounted and rode again. It was a quarter mile to the next turning. No sign of them.

It was easier going then, and the gray was comparatively fresh. A high valley lay beyond the Divide. There were groves of timber. The grass was lush green up there, removed from the sulphur smoke.

He stopped to let his horse breathe. He dismounted to listen. No sound of pursuit. Momentarily, at least, he'd outdistanced them.

He had a general idea where Deer Gulch was located. *Corkscrew Turn,* the deposition had said. He'd have to play his luck. The stage would be due in half

an hour, so the barricade would be up.

At a sharp turn he saw that a five or six hundred pound piece of slab rock had been levered out to the middle of the road. He turned his horse. A solid green wall of forest stood above, but he knew that men were crouched up there, looking down on him.

"Hold!" he heard Hernandez say. "It is heem, the Pecos Keed."

Pecos said, "All off, boys. I got that from the big boss himself."

He turned the gray upward from the road, belly deep through fern and buck-brush, over deadfalls that crumpled brick red under the hoofs.

Men showed themselves here and there —Big Jim, the Turk, Tobaccomouth, and powerful Tom Little with an eight-gauge shotgun in his hands.

Little was covering him. Little *knew.* He knew that the coach was a deadfall.

"Put that gun down, Tom," Pecos said softly.

"I'll put the gun down when I get good and—"

Hernandez had swept the gun from its turned-in holster at the same instant, as though the action were automatic with Pecos' words.

"Si! Covered, and I do not become happy when forced to shoot a man between the shoulder blades, Tom."

Little stiffened. He lowered the gun, dropped it to the ground.

Hernandez, with a laugh in his voice, said, "Like the old saying of the gringos, he who throws the gun away, live to run some other day. Now, Keed, tell me why you have run that gray pony until he is covered with lather like he is in a barbershop."

Pecos sat with one of Owen Peck's guns in his hand and said, "They're sendin' a deadfall coach up here. Bent to her hubs with deputy sheriffs. Jim, pick out three likely horses. Our days with the Lodgepole gang are finished."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Big Squeeze

PECOS found McCabe and sat down, dropping his hat on the floor.

"Fillmore." He said the name with a wry twist of his lips as though he'd have spat if there'd been moisture enough in his mouth. "That's our man—Fillmore."

"What in the devil are you talking about?"

"By the way, does Fillmore have a daughter? Twenty years old, pretty, put together like a young Gypsy?"

"You mean there's a man in the territory not damn well aware he has a daughter?"

Pecos laughed and rubbed his stubble of beard with a tired gesture. He'd been a long time without rest. Fatigue was heavy as quicksilver in his muscles, and when he closed his eyes little bluish lights danced in them. He kept thinking about her. She was old Ben's daughter, and she had saved his life.

"What's her name?"

"Dolly. Child of his second marriage. He's had four wives, you know. Like a Turk he is about wives, only making them wait their legal turns. Dolly's mother was an entertainer. Singer on the river packets, and in the dives of Vicksburg before the war. She's like her mother, from what I've heard. What about her, lad?"

"Why, I'd not be here if it hadn't been for her." He didn't enlarge on it. He went on, talking in brief sentences, telling everything that had happened since their last meeting.

Pat McCabe, after hearing the story from Pecos' lips, sat with a face that was gaunt and tired.

"So he's the one! Yes, I'd suspected. Fillmore's out to be king of the territory. He'll end with fifty million, a captain of commerce and industry. Another Leland

Stanford. He'll own all of Montana."

"Whoa! Don't let him get any bigger."

"I know what I'm talking about!" McCabe's voice had a saw-blade twang that carried through the walls outside. Then he checked its volume but not its intensity. "My stage and freight line is just something to kick out of his way. That isn't what he has his eyes on, and it isn't this town. It's *The Hill* back there. You think that's just another group of silver veins, don't you? You think silver is poor scratch?"

PECOS, laughing cigarette smoke from his mouth, said, "I like gold better because I can carry more in my pocket. Of course silver is good stuff, too, but—"

McCabe silenced him, saying, "Silver be damned! Do you know anything about mining?"

"I know a heap more about cows."

"Well, listen. There are several millions lying up there in the silver bonanzas, I suppose, but these deposits are all what a miner refers to as *secondaries*. They accumulate near the tops of the veins and play out. Four hundred feet down in the Anaconda do you know what they struck? Sooty copper and so damned much of it that it makes Spain's Rio Tinto look like a bag of pennies. And not just the Anaconda—you get deep on every one of those veins and—"

"Long way to ship copper ore—Swansea in Wales."

"Ever hear of the Northern Pacific railway? They can refine it here as soon as they get that sort of transportation."

"Seems like the N.P. is having a hard time getting past Bismarck."

"It'll be here, next year or the next. Villard is reorganizing. Maybe he'll go broke again in Fort Keogh, and if he does he'll reorganize a third time. And when it comes it'll make Butte the biggest camp in the West. Anaconda will be the biggest copper mine in the world."

Pecos had heard it all before. He'd heard the same thing in Central City, and Oro Seco, and Tombstone, and none of them looked like New York. That's how it would be with Butte when the silver bonanzas played out. But in the meantime he was working for McCabe.

"All right, Mack, so it's the richest hill on earth. I'll take your word for it. How does Fillmore get it by destroying you?"

"He already controls the Diamond Bar and the Hellgate line. When I'm gone he'll have the final say on every road, and every wagon. Find out how easy it is to ship to Swansea at a profit *then*. Oh, he'll be clever about it. Maybe he'll hold the present rates on blasting powder, tools, smelter flux. Maybe he'll raise the price of food to push up the price of labor. He'll give them the slow squeeze, extend credit, buy in on one after another. I don't know what he'll do, except that he'll have The Hill when the N.P. gets here."

Pecos got his boots down from the table and said, "Then, seh, it looks to me like it's up to the independent operators to keep you in business."

"Try and convince them of it," he said bitterly.

"Why, yes. That's what we'll do."

"How?"

"Suspend operation. Get your outfits off someplace. Haul between Benton and Miles City. Let Fillmore think you're all through. I was watching him last night, the way he paced the floor. Other folks never move or talk fast enough to suit him. There's more pounce than 'possum in Ben Fillmore. You quit hauling for two weeks and I'll wager he'll be strangling the bald-headed old hell out of those operators on The Hill."

"I'm not suspending."

"Why, that's up to you, seh."

THAT evening, while Pecos was passing his time in a small poker game at the Green Front, he heard that a print

dodger was up on the express board, announcing the last runs for McCabe coaches to Salt Lake City and Fort Benton, so he'd changed his mind.

Butte City showed no immediate effect. Pecos killed time. It was hell, being in town with nothing to do. Women, gambling and whiskey all attracted him, and to keep out of trouble he got a job trimming ore at the Galway Mine.

For one who was made ill at ease by the four walls of a room, the black bowels of the earth were unendurable. He quit and was seated in a Chinese cafe when Jim Swing found him.

"You got to come with me, Kid. You got to stop that crazy greaser."

"The hell with him. Sit up and have a piece of pie."

Pecos knew that Hernandez was out on a whoop-up, and as always this big, tow-headed saddle tramp was trying to keep him out of trouble. Right now there were big furrows of worry in Jim's forehead, and he had the eyes of a bereaved cow.

"You know what he's done? Got into a ruckus with Spade Hartman over a girl down at Hungry Annie's and now he's challenged Hartman to a duel. Hartman's got that whole Missouri Gulch crowd at his back, and they'll kill him."

Pecos ate pie and said, "Hartman has a notch for every man he's killed filed in the stocks of his guns. A man like that doesn't have friends. He has houn' dogs that follow him around ready to bite him when he's down."

"You know how Butch is when he's got that guitar under one arm and his gut full of liquor."

He was almost in tears. Pecos felt sorry for him, so he made his voice tougher than ever. "What can *I* do? Look what happened in McKetrick when I tried to save him from that Hole-in-the-Wall bunch—he challenged *me* to a duel. I should have fought him. Sometime I will. I'll shoot my initials in that Spik-Mick's hide and show him who's boss."

The duel didn't materialize. At the last moment Hartman discovered an urgent desire for other scenery, departing on the Hellgate coach, leaving Hernandez in undisputed charge at Hungry Annie's and Missouri Gulch.

About six o'clock in the evening two days later Pecos was in his room at the London House changing clothes for a supper invitation to McCabe's when the door opened and Hernandez dragged in.

Pecos said, "Well, ruby red eyes, you look like you been out on a dandy."

Hernandez sat down, held his head in his hands. "Amigo, I have fallen into days of ill fortune. I am in poor health and far in debt. Please lend me the sum of four hundred dollars that I may buy medicines and pay my honest debts before I am arrested for defrauding an innkeeper."

"The hell with you."

PECOS looked on him without sympathy. He had a two-day crop of whiskers. His mustache needed trimming. His clothes were sagging and dusty. A barber had days before dressed his hair with an overdose of pomade, and now a thick mop of it hung greasily over his forehead. He exuded an aura of wine and cheap perfume.

"Where's your guitar?"

"Eet is broken. Some fool stepped on it while doing the polka in a dance hall and it is beyond repair. Oh, *Madre Mia,* look across the long miles from my beloved Chihuahua and see what has happened your poor wandering boy thees night. Behold him seek and bankrupt without three dollars in his pants and even the friends of his heart speet on heem when he ask for four hundred steenking dollars."

"You owe me fifty thousand already."

"*Si.* But more. I am a man of honor."

He moved to get the little black notebook from his hip pocket, and leafed half way through. "The sum is feefty-four thousand, seex hundred twelve dollar and seex beets. Debts of honor, Señor! Listen to me, Hernandez Pedro Gonzales y Feunte Jesus Maria Flanagan, while I will never forget it but go on owing it until the last day of time."

Pecos gave him two hundred and told him to sober up. He had little trouble with liquor himself, but he kept getting deeper and deeper into the poker games. To keep out of trouble, he got Hernandez and Big Jim and made the long trip to Fort Benton, head of steamboat traffic on the Missouri. Returning eleven days later he found that the Fillmore squeeze was on in earnest.

Food prices, which had slowly been declining for six months suddenly leaped upward. There was still plenty of lean Texas beef, but flour was $60 a hundred, Utah spuds were $30 a bushel, and eggs a dollar each. Miners, no longer able to buy grub at the old wage scale, stayed off The Hill, and the Sons of Irish Freedom, calling it an English plot, paraded all the way from Dublin Gulch to the Travona where they rioted with a group of "Cousin Jacks," and blood flowed though not fatally.

Three mornings later an organizer for the secret society of Molly Maguires was found hanged to the sheave timbers of the Rising Star mine at the head of Beef-straight Gulch. Dark corner talk all blamed a tough employer, Lloyd Siddons, owner of the Transcontinental Lode, and the Maguires struck back setting off an underground powder magazine that closed the main working entrances to the Transcontinental indefinitely.

Next week it became known that Siddons had optioned the Transcontinental to Ben Fillmore, and sold outright his interests in the Blackjack and the Plata Fino on The Hill.

MOST of the operators kept going, raising wages a little, trying to squeeze out a margin of profit, but another jump in food prices brought pay demands that almost shut down the camp. Even placer miners in the gulch, hiring coolies at two dollars a day, felt the pinch.

Miners demonstrated in the street and somehow found money for whiskey. After hours of speechmaking they tramped downhill toward the big, clapboard warehouses of Fillmore's Diamond Bar Mercantile, singing,

"In every sort of season, whether it's wet or dry,
I toil for me livelihood or lie in the street and die;
Oh when me pockets jingle, I live on lager beer,
I'm a rambling wretch from Erin's sod,
The son of a gambol-eer!"

Reaching the warehouse they found the door wide open and supplies being carted to the platforms and stacked out for the taking. When the excitement quieted, Ben Fillmore came out on the roof and made a speech.

Did they know, he shouted through his cupped hands, that a single ton of high grade *silver glance* ore like they were taking from the Black Hawk, the Plata Fino, and a dozen other mines, would pay the day wage of a hundred of them? Did they know that McCabe's Three Forks Company had plenty of mules and wagons to haul food from Benton, from Salt Lake or from Fort Walla Walla if need be, but that it had suspended operations after a conference with those silver kings on The Hill?

"Why?" shouted Fillmore, "Why? Are they out to mine silver, or are they out to drive the Irish and Cornish away from Butte so they can bring in a horde of dagos from Chicago? I don't know what you gentlemen think, but *I* think it's high time the Irish and Cornish stop fighting each other and turn their attention to their real enemies.

"Did I hear someone say, Fillmore has an ax to grind. Well, by heaven, it's true. I have an ax to grind. Because the same combine that is trying to drive you from Butte is trying to bankrupt me."

It was a great speech. They marched away, loaded with grub, cheering Fillmore and damning the silver barons of The Hill.

But all the shouting and marching did no good. The mines remained closed. One after another the roasting fires died. For the first time in many months the air was clear, and a man could breathe without the rotted garlic fumes of sulphur and arsenic biting at his lungs.

Some men left for a new silver camp in Idaho, others formed a party and walked eastward to the Yellowstone to build a raft and float downstream to Bismarck where the Northern Pacific was once more hiring labor. But most of them stayed on, broke, idle, ready for violence.

Big Jim Swing narrowly missed being killed when someone hurled a pickax at him from the doorway of The Shamrock. It had reached the point where no mine owner or anyone identified with the McCabe interests dared approach Dublin Gulch or Butte itself closer than the headframe of the Neversweat shaft.

AT THAT point McCabe was able to get most of the independent operators together for a meeting at which they agreed to hold tight against further encroachment, but Fillmore, chiefly through options, already controlled better than forty per cent of The Hill. However, the meeting was only half a success, as McCabe was unable to get either of the smelters to pledge shipments from their large store of silver bullion, so the freight line remained suspended.

Fillmore increased his freight tonnages only a little, applying about half the camp's needs. Wildcat outfits rolled in from Benton, Hellgate and Salt Lake City, but road agents terrorized the trails to an extent unknown since the downfall of the Plummer gang making them demand double and treble rates.

Fillmore then played his next card, reopening the King Midas lode with fifty miners at high wages, and posting a sign at the foot of the Steward dump saying he'd put on six hundred more if he was not prevented by tunnel restrictions on the part of the *Silver Barons Association.*

Feeling ran high. All day men were gathered around the sign. In the afternoon, Fillmore agitators organized a march up the hill where they were met by gunfire from "detectives" on the Garflock property. The miners, armed for the most part with pick handle shillalahs, retreated carrying dead and wounded with them.

The funeral parade proved to be a fighting rally, and there was buzzing along the new telegraph line to the territorial capital in Helena.

Fillmore didn't relish the intervention of troops. He went to work quelling the thing he'd nursed along. He hastily hired a brass band which all afternoon and night played Irish airs in front of the Shamrock knowing that not even the most warlike member of the Molly Maguires could move from the sound of it.

Riding in from the west after sunset, the Pecos Kid drew up at the brow of The Hill and listened as a few instruments of the band played and a hundred voices were raised in an excellent, untrained symphony,

"With a cheer for bloody Cromwell,
They led him to the gallows tree,
Another murder for foul England
Another death for liber-tee."

Eight members of the association were sitting around the Silver Strike tool house, gloomily contemplating the news that one of their members, Otto Bleyhouser, owner of a group of claims along the north flank

of The Hill, had optioned his holdings to Filmore for sixteen thousand dollars cash, and a quarter million to be paid half in six months, and half in two years.

On the following days there were more defections—small owners who were willing to grab a good price and get out. After all, the Northern Pacific railway was a long time coming.

CHAPTER TEN

The Gun-Play's the Thing!

PECOS was at the corrals when Big Jim and Hernandez arrived from the Bitterroot, driving a herd of mules. They were joking about old times when they "took the lid off Denver," when McCabe came up and said in a voice that dampened their good spirits,

"It hasn't worked. It's been a damn failure. I shouldn't have suspended operations. I should never have listened to you."

Pecos looked gaunt from sudden temper, but he controlled himself. "Maybe you're right. It's gone farther than I expected. I never realized a bunch of Irishmen could cause so much trouble."

"Hungry men!" cried McCabe who was Irish himself. "Have you ever been hungry and had the gate of your livelihood slammed in your face?"

Pecos thought about it and reminisced, "Never forget one winter down on Wind River, it was twenty below with snow three feet deep and me without grub. I got so damned hungry I boiled and ate the buffalo skin teepee I was living in. That was a tough old bullhide teepee, too."

Hernandez said, "On the rancho of my uncle Jose Santiago Santos Bolivar y Santa Ana Gonzales was there a foreman name Pancho who for three months lost in the desert ate rattlesnakes, picking his teeth weeth the fangs, and a finer man you never knew, but afterward the *caballeria* had to shoot him he was so mean."

"Those Irish aren't mean."

Hernandez, dropping his Spanish accent as he was perfectly able to do when he chose, said, "Sure, and it was as me dear father said, They're the salt of the earth."

Pecos asked McCabe's estimate of the amount of silver bullion being held by members of the association there in Butte and received an answer of half a million ounces.

"We can't run those freight wagons out of here empty," Pecos said, "and it'll be hard getting consignments from merchants up in Benton, road agents being what they are. But here's something to consider—last I heard from Benton, flour had fallen to twelve dollars a hundred and no takers. Those outfits are feeling the Fillmore squeeze, too. But if we could get them to ship that bullion, and we could use it in Benton as collateral, we could make a killing. Put every horse, mule and wagon into one convoy. If we could roll that through both ways, and repeat a couple of times, prices here would hit the skids. We'd have his hold broken."

"Yes, and what will *he* be doing all the while?"

Pecos laughed and said, "Why, all we have to do is find *that* out and we'll have him licked."

That meeting of the operators proved more successful than either of them expected. Lloyd Siddons was there. He'd returned from San Francisco to collect a ten thousand dollar payment on Fillmore's option on the Transcontinental Lode, but the money wasn't forthcoming. Fillmore had stalled behind a legal technicality and now Siddons wanted them to back him in retrieving his property.

McCabe cried, "You mean Fillmore lacks ten thousand cash?"

"He's overreached himself. Times are tough since Jay Cooke went under trying

to finance that streak of rust they call the Northern Pacific. I was in San Francisco, and I know. You can't get a dollar in call money even for the Comstock, let alone a camp called Butte they've hardly heard of. I tell you, Fillmore has reached the end of his rope."

By the end of the meeting, more than one hundred thousand ounces of silver bullion was pledged for the big shipment.

Riding night and day, horseback to Helena, and thence by coach, the Pecos Kid made a journey to Fort Benton and back again. Returning to Butte, he saw that the Star o' the West smelter had its charcoal blast going. Once more there was a haze from the roasting fires. A stream of rusty-looking water ran from the pumps that were unwatering the Anaconda. At ten or fifteen minute intervals one could hear the rush and rattle of ore as it was carried by metal faced chute from the portal of the Neversweat to some bins behind the National Exchange.

Only one man in four had a job, but credit was easy. Butte was suddenly its old, booming self again.

IT WAS night. Hernandez limped inside the freight office after an almost continuous twenty-four hours in the saddle. He elbowed past some half drunk mule skinners and reached McCabe who was writing cash orders for advance pay good on presentation to the Territorial Trust in Benton.

"Where's Pecos?" Hernandez asked.

"At the Star smelter, checking bullion weights."

Hernandez cursed in choice English, Spanish and Cherokee. He'd ridden within a quarter-mile of the smelter on his way to town.

"What's wrong?" McCabe asked, looking at his face.

"I have been to robber's roost. I have talked weeth—" He stopped short of calling Chevalier by name. "Weeth a friend of mine. There will be old *Diablo* to pay before those wagons reach Three Forks' Señor, and all his legions of hell waiting to collect."

"We can match man for man everyone he has at robber's roost."

"Everyone he *did* have. But *now*—is there a gunman, or renegade, or so much as one saloon tramp left between Hellgate and Cheyenne after such a mob of cutthroats have been brought together?"

He limped back to his horse. Big Jim had seen him arrive and was waiting. They rode together to the smelter where Pecos, standing in deep boredom, hat low on his eyes, was writing down the ounce weights of ingots as they were weighed on a balance big enough to take a man.

He kept jotting the figures called out while listening to Hernandez's story.

He said, "Sure you can believe what Chevalier says?"

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"He hates the yellow insides of that gunman, Addis. Besides, did I not count forty-two men myself?"

"How many did Chev say?"

"Seexty-five, seventy."

"And they'll pick up Fillmore's private rough boys here in town. We'll play hell fighting off a hundred men when that convoy gets strung out in the mountains."

"Then it is all off?" Hernandez asked sadly.

"I didn't say that."

Hernandez flashed his white teeth in a grin. "Ha! then the Pecos Kid has sometheeng up his shirt sleeve."

"Only my arm, and it's getting almighty tired pushing this pencil."

IT WASN'T the truth, but Pecos had learned that the Spanish Irishman had never quite mastered the art of keeping his mouth shut.

He left Hernandez to complete the silver inventory, sent Big Jim to the freight house to keep check on the stock and wagons, and walked down the steep streets toward the Fillmore mansion.

It was a huge, three story, brown shingled place of squarish cupolas, bay windows, and ornate iron bric-a-brac standing in the center of some big grounds where shrubbery, imported from England and Pennsylvania, stood bare of leaves despite the repeated coatings of wax which were supposed to make them proof against the smelter fumes.

It was past midnight, but lights were still burning here.

He didn't bother to climb the stone fence and attempt to conceal his approach by passing through the shrubbery. He walked directly through the rear carriage gate, past the coolie house, and the barn.

A lantern burned in the barn, and a shadow moved. Pecos stopped as a chipmunk faced man came to the door with a brush in one hand and a currycomb in the other.

"Fillmore around?" Pecos asked.

"Yeah. I was just swiping down his horse."

"How about Dolly?"

"I ain't seen her."

He walked on. He didn't know whether the hostler suspected anything. Back somewhere, in the depths of the carriage house, men were talking, laughing, rattling money. There were others around. A horse jerked with a jingle of bridle links. A voice he'd never heard before was saying, "—well Stallcup did it without a quirt or anything. He'd take this big bay and—"

The voice drifted off. Through the back door screen he could see the stairs down which Owen Peck had sprawled with a bullet through him. He followed a mosaic walk around to the side. A door there was locked. He kept going, passed beneath an arbor bare of vines, and tried the front door.

It let him inside a high, square entrance hall.

Light from a suspended lamp shone down on him. He looked quickly around. The hall was empty. At his left were the main stairs, covered with Persian carpet. At his right were some sliding doors that lacked half an inch of being closed. He moved close, fixed his eye, and saw a large drawing room furnished with baroque magnificence. No sound, no movement.

A board creaked, and he spun expecting to see someone on the stairs. No one there. He noticed his gun was in his hand. He dropped it back in the holster. It had been someone on the second floor.

HE THOUGHT of Dolly more than her father, the man he had come to find. He owed his life to her. That made his job all the tougher.

He climbed the stairs, wondering if he'd meet her. It was impossible not to think of the way she moved and talked,

of the warmth of her hands, the slim conformation of her body.

He reached the top of the stairs. Inside, the house proved bigger than he'd imagined. He turned to his left. There was a sun room with a bay window looking out on the grounds. Then he saw the massive, oaken door she'd opened to free him from the vault.

He listened at Fillmore's office. Fillmore's deep voice came to him, and the reedy tones of old Matthew.

Pecos touched the knob, turned it little by little, making not the slightest sound. Then a third voice came to him, and his hand froze on the knob. It was the voice of Cole Addis.

"I could quote your own words on that score, chief," Addis was saying. *"Don't ever overestimate a friend or underestimate an enemy.* Don't underestimate the Pecos Kid. He's more than any ordinary cow-walloper or gunman. He was smart enough to be a major under Johnston in the Civil War."

"I'm not underestimating him," Fillmore said smoothly. "I just don't intend to send men out there that I can't trust in order to increase their numbers. Anyway, according to my figures, there'll be thirty-nine, and that should be sufficient."

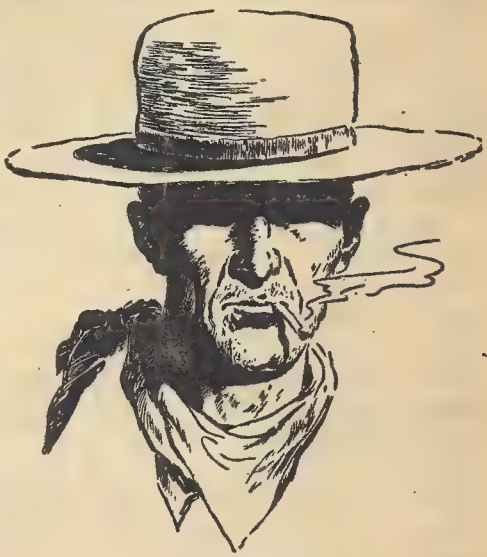
Pecos had a sudden feeling that someone was behind him. He spun around. The hall was empty. Sweat ran down his cheeks. Heat of the house seemed insufferable. He'd never been at his best inside four walls. He was like Big Jim. He'd spent too much of his life under the open sky.

He walked back along the hall and found a place of concealment beneath some stairs leading to the third floor. He hunkered and wished for a cigarette. He anticipated a long period of waiting, but a scant five minutes passed before Cole Addis, Ed Roe and a stranger came out and went clumping down the back stairs.

Pecos, puffing an unlighted cigarette, was at Fillmore's door before they got outside. He opened it and went in.

Fillmore sat beyond the mahogany table scratch-scratching on paper with a little ivory pen, hitting the ink with a blotter as he went along. Without looking up he said, "Matthew, I do wish you'd—"

He stopped. Something made him realize it wasn't Matthew. He looked up and stiffened when he saw the Pecos Kid.



Cole Addis

"Hello, Mr. Fillmore," Pecos said politely. "No, I wouldn't get my hands out of sight. Guns aren't your strong point. Handling money you'd have me down to my last centavo in five minutes, but guns, now that's a different matter. Every man to his game."

HE WALKED around the table with Fillmore's eyes following him and glanced in the next room. Matthew wasn't there. No one had seen nor heard.

He pulled the lamp down on its counterbalance and lighted his cigarette off the chimney. Fillmore stared at him. He seemed unable to get his breath. His cheeks were spots of scarlet and he was white around the lips.

"What do you want here?"

"You, seh."

He stared at Pecos. It was hard to tell whether fright or rage had the upper hand with him.

Pecos went on in his smooth, rather lazy voice, "You're coming with me. Without giving alarm or causing trouble, you're coming with me. Now get your hat."

Fillmore lunged to his feet. His stomach rammed the table and his legs almost knocked his chair over backward. His fists were doubled. The size of his stomach made him stand very erect, and at that moment he resembled a bantam rooster, but there was nothing comic about him. He was still the man who had faced an angry mob and sent them away cheering.

"If you think you can get away with a thing like this—"

"You're talking too loud, seh."

Pecos, with a brushing movement of his hand, drew the Colt from its right hand holster and rammed it hard in Fillmore's side. The man inhaled sharply from pain. Sight of the gun made his cheeks lose color. Pecos knew how he felt. He'd had his own insides tie up in a knot when he looked into the muzzle of a gun.

"I'll have your gun." He took it, another European piece, identical to the first. "It seems almost like I'm collectin' 'em."

Fillmore, looking at the Colt, got words through his throat, "Shoot me and you'll never get out of here alive."

"Why, maybe not. Neither of us. That'd be bad. Take your hat. Put it on. Take that walking stick, too. Now go ahead of me. I'll be keeping the Colt out of sight all the time, but it'll be ready. Don't you ever forget it'll be ready, Fillmore, seh. If we meet anybody, just speak. If anybody asks questions, say we're going yonder to talk about freight. Otherwise, s' help me—"

He whispered, short of breath, "All right."

They went to the hall, down the front stairs, outside. Laughter and the voices of men came from back toward the barns. Fillmore heard them and looked sick at his helplessness to summon help when it was so close.

"Across the yard. Swing the stick and act happy. The play, seh! *The play's the thing.* I was snowed in one winter with a prospector in those hills back o' Yellowjack, and he had a set of books. Shakespeare. Fellow in one of 'em said that. *The play's the thing.* By the way, what sort of bush is that, Mr. Fillmore? That one with the silver bark? I hear you paid two-three hundred dollars to get some of these things from England. I bet they thought they'd died and gone to hell when you unpacked 'em in this arsenic smoke."

"Where are you taking me?"

"Wagon ride. On that convoy headed out to Benton. It's fine in the mountains this time of year, away from the smoke and the hullabaloo."

With an effort, Fillmore managed to laugh. "Say, one has to admire you. Taking me out of my own house, from under the noses of a dozen gunmen. What are you doing, working for that McCabe outfit, anyway? You should be with me. What is he paying you?"

"Sorry, Fillmore. Table stakes. I'll stick to the side I came in on. That's why I'll die broke. No genius for money."

"You have no regard for your neck, either. I'm too influential in this territory. You can't kidnap and murder a man like me and get away with it."

"You won't be harmed in that wagon convoy. Not if it's not attacked. You'll get to Benton as safely as it does. In fact, that's why you're going along."

He called Big Jim to the darkness of the stable runway, told him to get Fillmore out of town to the third stage shanty seventeen miles out on the Three Forks road, then, with dawn silhouetting the horizon, he walked back to the mansion.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Little Gypsy Hellcat

LAMPLIGHT and tobacco smoke streamed from the open door and windows at the far side of the carriage house. He could hear voices, familiar and unfamiliar, the creak of movement, the jingle of coins. A man in the door moved to make way for him.

"Cole around?" Pecos asked quietly.

"Yonder," and he jerked his head.

Pecos stood in the door. Eleven or twelve men were seated and standing around a square table watching as the Turk, with a pack of cards almost lost in his huge, blackish hand, dealt with what seemed to be clumsy slowness. Cole Addis stood with one boot propped on a box. He saw one of the men catch a jack that made three of a kind, grunted, and tossed in his cards. Then he looked up and saw Pecos.

He went rigid for just an instant, then a smile turned the corners of his mouth. "Well, I'm damned! There's old vinegar guts himself! *Guts is right.* Did you come down here all alone, Pecos?"

Mention of the name *Pecos* stopped the game. For a few seconds there were no sounds except the uneasy floor and chair creakings as men moved to slightly different positions.

Pecos said in his easy voice, "Why, I might be alone. What difference does it make?"

"You were a spy out there at the valley, and I don't like spies. To my way of thinking, the best place for a spy is six feet underground. Only I doubt we'll go to that much bother with you."

"I doubt whether you'll shoot me at all." His tone made Addis listen. "Before any of your boys go for their guns, you better check with Fillmore. Oh, I know, you were just talking to him—you, and Ed Roe, and another of your boys, but things have just recently changed."

Addis' eyes were slits above his high cheek bones. "How in hell do you know so much?"

I FEEL A COLD A COMING ON. I WISH I COULD FORGET IT.
I'D TAKE SOME ALKA-SELTZER AS SOON AS I COULD GET IT.
GIVE ME AN ALKA-SELTZER, I THINK I'M CATCHING COLD.
IT EASES COLD DISCOMFORTS, AND QUICKLY, I'VE BEEN TOLD.
WHEN YOU WANT FIRST AID RELIEF, AND WANT IT IN A HURRY, ALKA-SELTZER ON THE SHELF, SAVES TROUBLE, TIME AND WORRY.
Alka-Seltzer
FIRST AID FOR RELIEF OF COLD DISCOMFORTS ACID INDIGESTION AND HEADACHES
FIRST AID for FAST RELIEF
If you have acid indigestion at bedtime take Alka-Seltzer for fast relief. You will rest better and wake up feeling better the next morning. Try it and see.
AT ALL DRUG STORES U. S. and CANADA
Alka-Seltzer

"Why, I was there, waiting my turn. I was inside, talking with him, before you got down the back stairs. He's a reasonable man, Fillmore is, when he sees the strength of the other man's arguments. In this case I convinced him he was making a mistake. So he says to tell you the attack is off. That's what I came to say."

Without taking his eyes off Pecos, Addis addressed the Turk, "Go up to the house."

Pecos said, "If you're looking for Fillmore you'll have to go a heap further than the house."

"Are you trying to say you kidnapped him?"

"I wasn't going to use that word. I just convinced him it would be better for his health if he got away from all these smelter fumes. Offered him a free pass to Benton—on the wagon train."

Addis cried, "If you're holding him on one of those wagons, why we'll take him off!"

Pecos had a slow way about him. He looked around at their faces, drawn and suspicious under the lamplight. "That's up to you. But the first man that rides up to a McCabe wagon is going to draw bullet lead. If Fillmore gets shot in the ruckus, who's going to pay you off? I ask you all to think that over. *Who's going to pay you off?*"

He knew there was a man behind him. A gun, in being drawn, always makes a certain click-click sound. The rattle of its cylinder. Without turning Pecos said:

"Cole, you tell him to put his Colt back in the leather. I'm pretty certain Mr. Fillmore wouldn't want anything to happen to me."

Addis took a very deep breath, steadying himself. Then he said through tight lips, "Put it back."

The man was Tobaccomouth Billy. He lowered his gun, grunted, spat, and rammed it in the holster.

"Why, good mawnin', Billy," Pecos said, and walked away up the flagstoned carriage track to the steep street.

THE WAGON train had been scheduled to leave at dawn, but the stock was wild, some of the drivers were inexperienced, and most of them had taken on a pint or two against the rigors of the trail. They were still in the yard, trying to get in line, as the sun rose.

At about ten o'clock a volley of gunfire ripped through the excitement, and every man in the yard dropped his work to see what the ruckus was.

They discovered that guardsmen hired by the independents to patrol The Hill had tangled with Fillmore men reinforced by some of the more irresponsible Molly Maguires. It was a pointless, drunken row, and when both sides retreated a dead man lay on his back in the middle of Kilarney Lane.

No one seemed to know which side he'd been on. But it didn't matter.

It was past noon when at last the wagons were maneuvered into line, and the command was given that sent them one following another downhill, across the flats, on the first leg of the long haul to Three Forks and Benton.

PECOS had a drink of old Kentucky with McCabe. Both of them felt good to have the thing finally under way. Afterward he washed in water from the trough spout, and walked dripping to the room he'd fixed for himself in the freight building.

He hadn't left the door closed, but it was closed now. It occurred to him that Hernandez had been there in his absence. He opened it with a wet hand and stopped a single stride inside with the realization that Dolly Fillmore was there somewhere, waiting for him.

Her perfume was very strong. He blinked his eyes, trying to drive the sunflicker out of them.

A gun hammer clicked, and she said, "Come on in."

He made his voice good humored. "What if I'd rather not?"

"You know the answer to that."

Slowly things took form. She was seated on a stool against the far wall, leaning forward, holding her .32 rimfire revolver in both hands, her hands resting on her knees, her knees pressed together. She wore a blouse and a riding skirt. Her face seemed thinner than he remembered it. It seemed to be all eyes, and the eyes were fastened on him.

"Come in," she whispered through her teeth.

"All right. I'm in. Now what?"

"Close the door."

He did, using his heel. Only light from one smoky windowpane now. He could barely see her, but her eyes had had ample time to become accustomed to the gloom.

She said, "Where is he?"

"Your father? He's not here. You can see that. There aren't four men left in the freight yard. If that's why you have the gun on me I'm warning you you're wasting your time."

"I asked where he was."

He needed some time to think about things. He didn't like the way she pointed that gun. He could feel water running down his neck.

He said, "Mind if I dry myself?"

"I asked—"

"Sure, and I'll answer. I reckon he's somewhere on the wagon train."

"He isn't. I was in here and heard you talking to McCabe. He's at Number Three cabin. I heard you say so. Turn him loose."

"All right, it's seventeen miles off, but—"

"Stop!" Her hand had tightened on the gun.

He said, "Well, what can I do? I can't free him staying in the room, and I can't go outside."

THE FACT he wasn't right there at the freight house evidently came as a surprise to her. She hadn't even suspected on overhearing mention of Number Three cabin.

Words came through her teeth, "I should kill you!"

"Dolly—" He'd never called her that before. He licked his lips. "Dolly, they'll

Fillmore

put him on the wagon train tonight. Nothing will happen to him if nothing happens to the wagons. He'll reach Fort Benton as safely as the wagon train does."

"His being on that train won't stop the attack!"

"You mean to tell me that Cole Addis would still cut loose knowing that Ben Fillmore might—"

"He can't stop them. There are twenty men out there under Mutt Frye and nobody knows where the attack will come.

How can they, not even knowing which road you intend to take? Pecos, you'll have to get him off that wagon train. You'll *have* to!"

She'd stood up. The gun was still pointed, but her voice and eyes pleaded with him. She came a step forward, another.

"Pecos," she whispered, "won't you do it for *me?*"

She'd saved his life that night in the house. Now he'd have to doublecross her. It was hell, but he had no choice.

She was quite close. She leaned against him, her cheek was pressed against his chest.

"I love him, Pecos. I love my dad. I know he's started a lot of rough play, but don't let anything happen to him. Help me, Pecos."

Her hands were soft and warm. They were around his neck. Her fingers tangled in his hair. Her lips were parted. Her skin gave off that perfume, but it was different when she was close, brought out by the warmth of her body.

He kissed her. It made him forget everything. It took him back over the raw-tough years, even before the war, when he was a kid, and there was another girl. That other girl—he'd almost forgotten her name, but for a moment it was almost as though she was there again, in his arms.

Dolly whispered, "Oh, Pecos!"

He got his mind free. No matter how he wanted her, he couldn't sell out the side he'd come in on.

His lips formed the words, "Table stakes."

"What?"

The gun was still in her hand. The right hand that was around his neck. He reached, grabbed her by the wrist, and with a sudden twist snapped the gun from her hand.

She spun away from him, quick as a mountain cat. She bent, trying to snatch the gun from the floor. He'd anticipated the move. He kicked it away. She was on hands and knees, still scrambling for it. He bent over, seized her by the arms, pulled her to her feet.

She fought. She clawed and bit. He held her at arm's length until she stopped and was sobbing and panting.

He let her go. She held to the little rough-board table for support. Suddenly she saw her chance and darted toward the door. He let her get past, and seized her, holding her helpless with her arms behind her.

"No. You're not going to Addis."

Addis would know where to find Number Three cabin. Her mistake was waiting for him. She just hadn't realized the extent of the information she'd overheard.

HE BOUND her wrists together with his neckerchief, tied her to the post of his bunk. He stepped to the door. The freight yard was empty. He called for McCabe, and then for Hernandez without getting an answer. At last a hulking, half-witted hostler called Red Bub came to the door of a stable and stood with his mouth sagging.

Pecos sailed him a four bit piece and said, "Get Hernandez and bring him here."

He went back inside. His hair was still wet from the bath he'd taken. He dried himself and paid scarcely any attention to the girl as she fought to free herself, and then called him names, every bitter, derisive thing she could put her tongue to.

Hernandez came on a half run and stopped just inside the door with his eyes popping at sight of the girl.

"What is thees? Pecos, you have forgotten how to be a gentleman that you would keep a woman in your room by tying her to the bedpost?"

"Don't let your chivalry get the better of you. She's found out too much and has to stay here. You *keep her here.*"

"*Si,*" Hernandez said sadly. "If it is your command, Keed, then she will be here."

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Big Double-Cross

DUST in a fine, white cloud stood over the wagon train as it wound across the flats. The wagons were not strung out as was usually the case. Each lead team was kept close on the tailgate of the wagon ahead of it.

Drivers plodded along with bandannas tied against dust that rolled upward from the wheels, from the hoofs, from everything. Guardsmen ranged the country on all sides, never going too far, never taking the chance of being cut off from the main group.

A short, truculent man had stopped his horse crosswise in the road, and sat with a sawed-off shotgun across the pommel of his saddle as Pecos rode up. He was Ned Comer, graduate of the Minnesota state pen, for the past two months employed as a "company detective" by the Silver Glance mine.

"Oh, you!" he grunted, as though just seeing who it was. "That's a damned good way to get shot, riding up like that."

Pecos had never liked him. Straight through, the men on one side were as bad as those on the other. He rode on, past the long line of wagons, and found Fred Cluff up front.

"Any trouble?"

Cluff shook his head. "We wouldn't, here. But once we're switching around the bends in the mountains we'll be like pie at a Chink restaurant."

"We have some guns, too, you know."

"I wouldn't trust any of 'em. I wouldn't bet that half them detectives on The Hill didn't have a piece of Fillmore cash in their pokes right this minute."

"You won't have any trouble."

He looked angry. "How in hell can you say that?"

"I didn't tell you, but you're going to pick up a passenger for Benton down at Number Three shanty. Ben Fillmore's going along."

"What the—?"

"Big Jim has him there. He'll take care of him. If it isn't dark when you get to Number Three, wait for dark. Don't let your men know what's going on. Get Fillmore under the sheets of that big hooligan wagon, and keep him there all the way to Benton."

"Then what? How about those vigilantes in Benton?"

"Let me worry about them. And for that matter, you can let Big Jim worry about Fillmore. I don't think there'll be any attack on the wagon train."

He rode back through the heat of late afternoon. He dismounted into the shade of the pole awning in front of the freight office and looked for McCabe. He walked from room to room, and found the long building empty. No one near the corrals. Most of the gates stood open. Through hot, quiet sunlight he could see the haze of a million tiny gnats circling the corral earth.

He climbed some stairs up a steep pitch of the hill, went around to the door of his room.

"Everything all right, Butch?" he asked.

After a slight hesitation, "*Si.* Everytheeng."

He stepped inside. A shaft of sunlight cut the shadowed interior and he saw Hernandez sitting beyond the table with a six-shooter in his hand. The gun was pointed very steadily at the Pecos Kid.

"What the devil—?"

"Yes, you are covered, Keed." There was a tremble in Hernandez's voice, though none in his hand. He seemed ready to weep. "Keed, raise your hands and please make no trouble. I would not

wish to be forced to shoot you down."

PECOS started to laugh. The intensity of Hernandez's dark eyes stopped him. The crazy Spik-Mick meant it. He could see the rest of the room then. The girl was gone. Hernandez had been packing things in his warbag.

"You damned fool, have you gone soft on that girl?"

"Señor Keed, you would not understand me. You have never felt the Spanish type of love. It is like a flame, like a forest fire and nothing can stand before it!"

"Listen, you—"

"Hands up! For her would I not hesitate to shoot. For her I give up honor, friends, everything. You must understand me, Keed. You must understand and not hold it against your poor Hernandez who must do what he must. This girl she love me. She will sacrifice everything for me, and so must I also for her. Now, turn around that I may take your guns."

Pecos obeyed. He knew better than make a fight. Hernandez was too good with a gun, knew all the tricks. He felt the weight of his Colts removed one after the other.

"Where is she?"

"Saddling the horses to fly with me, *mi amigo.*"

"Where you going with her?"

"First to rescue her father, then we will ride into the sunset. Perhaps to Chihuahua where I will pay by debts and settled on the hacienda of my people. Time will cover the hurt, amigo. You will forgive your Hernandez that he has taken this woman away from you. You will some day come to visit and be received like a hero, like a great Don, and sit at the table with my sweetheart who has grown more beautiful with the years, and with my children on all sides—"

"You damn dumb Spik, she had her arms around *my* neck not five minutes before you came. And it wasn't the first time she had 'em there either. How long do you think—?"

"That is a lie!"

"Stop ramming me with your gun."

"A lie! You are trying to torture me. Only Hernandez does she care for. Señor, with your guns have you won from me feefty thousand dollars, but at love will a Flanagan take the back chair to no man. She is mine and so she will remain unto the end of time. And now, turn around and walk through the door."

"Where you taking me?"

"To the express house. To lock you in the strong room."

"What'll you do when you meet McCabe?"

"He is not there. I have sent him miles away to the silver smelter. I have sent the Chinese away, the halfwit boy I have sent away."

"You thought of everything."

"I have for three years had a good teacher—yourself. But now, alas, it is the time for *adios.* But some day—"

"Don't worry about us meeting again, Butch. We will. I'll find you. I'll find you if I have to follow you down the last snake hole in that Conchos River desert. And when I do I'll put my brand on your hide. I'll put it there with a two hundred and fifty grain chunk of Sam Colt lead."

"Walk!"

FAR BELOW, Pecos could see men moving along the up and down streets. A steam hoist was laboring with a series of short whistle toots at the Anaconda mine, warning a repair crew that a skip-load of silver-copper ore would soon be rushing down the chute.

"Walk!"

The ore hit like thunder. Far across the flats he could see the dust of the train but no wagons. They were gone, hidden by a ridge. The stables were deserted. The

freight and express houses looked empty. Less than fifty steps away a woman was out, hanging up her wash, but she didn't look up, and Pecos couldn't call.

They walked through rooms that gave an empty reasonance to the clump of their boots.

The strongroom door was open.

"Inside!" said Hernandez.

Hernandez, a boot placed against the door ready to close it, paused a few seconds with the gun in his right hand, his left lifted in a sad sign of farewell.

"Keed, someday you will understand. With tears in my heart, *adios.*"

"You lousy, yellow saddle bum. You dirty turncoat Spick-Mick. I save your hide five times and this is how I get paid off. You sell me out for the first piece of lace that hitches her skirt at you. I'll find you, do you hear? I'll find you, and when I do—"

He found himself shouting at the closed door. He rammed it. It was locked. The room had no windows. It was dark as the five hundred level of the Anaconda mine. The walls were thick pine logs, squared, and fit together tightly without a crack anywhere.

He kept cursing Hernandez. Finally he cursed himself out. He laughed, but there was no humor in it. He had a clasp knife in his pocket. He tried it on the plank door. He could carve his way out in thirty days.

He finally sat down with his back against the wall, found his makings, rolled a cigarette. He didn't light it. There was little enough air to last him through the long hours it might take for help to arrive.

About half an hour passed, though it seemed a lot longer. Unexpectedly there was a rattle of a padlock, and the door swung open. He lunged to his feet and saw Hernandez Flanagan standing in the opening.

"Don't say eet!" he put both hands in front of his face as though warding off a more bitter blow than he was able to endure. "She has double-crossed me, she is gone, she has made a fool of me. Was there ever on all the earth such a horse's south end going north as your poor Hernandez? Pecos, amigo of my heart, take up a gun and shoot me, for I am a traitor."

"She has gone! She has double-crossed me! Was there ever such a fool on earth?"

Pecos went through the door and stood opening and closing his hands as though he wanted to get them on Hernandez' throat.

"Where is she now?"

"How would I know?"

She had half an hour's start. She'd ride for help—or maybe she'd go alone, straight to Number Three Cabin to find her father.

"Get my guns." Hernandez already had them in his hands. "Saddle the horses."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Strike-Out

THE ROAD from Butte City took a snaky, in and out course avoiding the steep pitches, so Pecos and Hernandez left it after two miles to shotcut through the hills. Ahead, and to their right was a dust cloud, fine as flour, gold-tinted by the sunset. That was the wagon train.

The hills steepened. There was scrub timber. They rode down a little gulch and came out on some flats with the cabin and corrals in sight. The wagon train had come to a stop about a mile away. Some of the wagons had pulled from the road and the stock was feeding.

There was no one at the cabin. They rode on, urging their tired horses, and found Big Jim lying on a blanket twisting from pain while a teamster worked over a wound in his side.

It was a bullet wound, still oozing blood. Apparently one of his ribs had been shattered.

Pecos grinned and said, "You fighting with women?"

Big Jim got his eyes in focus and managed to talk. "She sneaked up on the cabin. I was in the door, watching the wagons. She said she'd shoot me if—" He didn't finish. The muscles of his neck were corded as the teamster probed around, packing the wound. "She did, too. She knocked me down with that little .32. Rode off with Fillmore. I'm a hell of a guy, let a woman—"

"And *I*," cried Hernandez. "At least she had a gun in her hand when she crooked her forefinger at *you*."

The wagon train stopped for grub and water. It moved on through early darkness. There'd be no real rest for men or horses until they reached the flats of the Three Forks a long night and day distant.

Pecos and Hernandez secured fresh horses from the corral and rode ahead of the train, up mountain slopes, through timber. After long, early darkness, the moon rose. They could see the road, far below, through the breaks in the forest.

Hernandez, long silent, said, "I could use a smoke."

"Go ahead, but hide the match in your hat." Pecos went on talking, giving voice to his thoughts. "You remember that ambush down on the Beaverhead? They'll pick a spot like that here, too. They'll try to cut the train in half."

"Perhaps the girl will not find them. Perhaps the attack will be called off."

"I wouldn't bet on it."

Hernandez rested one leg around the saddlehorn and smoked, hiding the coal of his cigarette. Then with a quick movement he pinched the coal. There were riders through the trees, directly below them. One of them spoke. His voice seemed right beside them. It was Tom Little.

He was saying, "Why yes, but Cole turned thumbs down on it. Then when he heard that your dad was being held hostage he called the whole thing off."

The voice of Dolly Fillmore answered, "My father ordered the attack! Cole had no business—"

"Don't blame *me* for it, gal."

They said more, but the words were covered by distance.

Hernandez whispered, "We will have to follow them."

"Sure." Pecos sounded sleepy. "But we'll let 'em get up the trail a piece."

HERNANDEZ fidgeted as though the saddle were too hot for him, but Pecos seemed perfectly at ease, moving only to slap at an occasional mosquito.

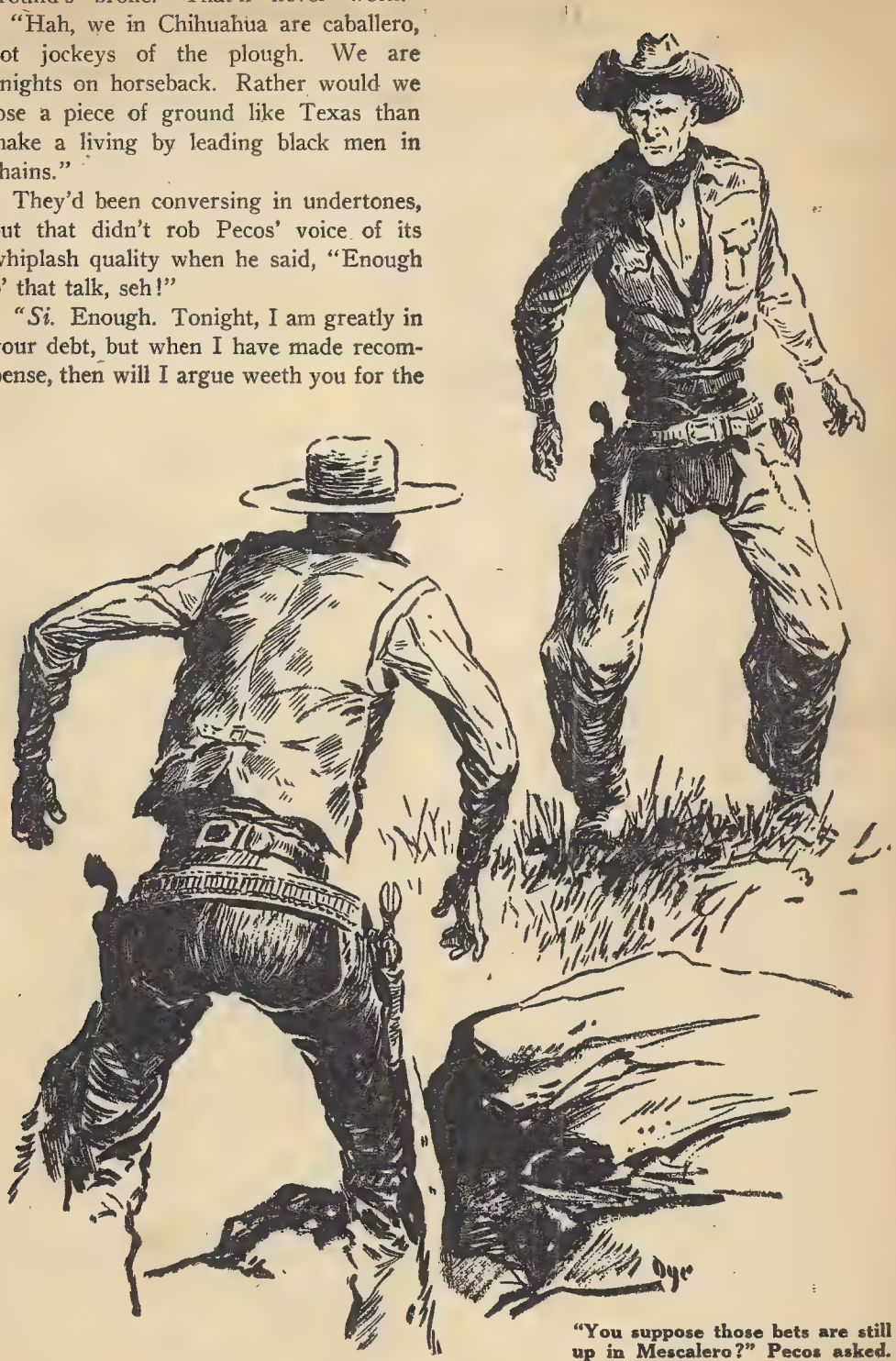
At last he nudged his horse into movement, down the rough hill to the saddlehorse trail. "That's the trouble with you Mexicans," he said. "That's why you lost Texas. You got no patience. You always want to plant cotton before the

ground's broke. That'll never work."

"Hah, we in Chihuahua are caballero, not jockeys of the plough. We are knights on horseback. Rather would we lose a piece of ground like Texas than make a living by leading black men in chains."

They'd been conversing in undertones, but that didn't rob Pecos' voice of its whiplash quality when he said, "Enough o' that talk, seh!"

"*Si.* Enough. Tonight, I am greatly in your debt, but when I have made recompense, then will I argue weeth you for the



"You suppose those bets are still up in Mescalero?" Pecos asked.

honor of Chihuahua which is as great as the honor of Texas."

They rode on with Hernandez speaking his thoughts, addressing the night around him rather than the Pecos Kid. "Why is eet soldiers of the Confederacy have always one part vinegar and one part blood in their veins? In Chihuahua each alternate year is fought the civil war. If the Chihuahua Republicans lose to the Durango Royalists, is there hatred for ten years after? No, after the fighting comes big fiesta and when the fiesta is over everyone has forgotten who won the war anyway."

They paused and sat listening for sound of the horses. They'd been traveling too slowly. They increased their pace. There was movement below, along the freight road. They had a brief glimpse, as the two riders turned up a gulch.

The trail played out. They'd lost them.

Pecos said, "We'd better climb the ridge. Keep watch for the wagon train. I don't want to get more'n three or four miles ahead of it."

A cloud bank covered the moon, drifted away. They sat watching the road for what seemed to be hours.

Hernandez said, "In Nuevo Mejico one time I owned a watch. It was a big silver watch with a key on a chain. I won it from a Chinaman playing three card monte, and if I had it now I would tell you how long until morning right to the very minute."

Pecos looked at the stars. They'd dimmed a little in the east but not at the zenith.

Hoofs clattered suddenly. A column of men came in sight and disappeared down the freight road. There were about twelve of them.

"That must be it," Pecos said.

HE SPURRED away with Hernandez on his heels trying to keep pace along the unpredictable mountain trail. They found themselves outdistanced, pulled up to listen. On the air, carried by a night breeze, was the taste of dust—dust ground fine, stirred by the wheels of wagons. And a few seconds later came the crash of gunfire.

The volley was a sudden one, followed by a pause while echoes rattled around the high summits. Then the gunfire settled down to a steady exchange.

They kept riding, cleared a shoulder of the mountain, saw the wagon train strung out on both sides of a rock reef that ran from the summit to the canyon bottom. It was the Beaverhead technique all over again.

Teamsters had stopped and gone for cover. There was shooting from the wagons, from rocks along the road. Some of the guardsmen seemed to be making a fight of it, but most of them had evidently taken it on the lope when the fight started.

Pecos kept going downhill through pine thickets until the reef was a hundred yards away. He pulled in, grabbed Hernandez's bridle. The two horses lunged in a half circle as their riders dismounted. Hernandez had both Colts drawn.

"See?" Pecos said. "There you are plantin' cotton before you break ground. Let's look it over."

They found one group of attackers scattered along the mountain, pouring a steady fire into the train, but the other group, the main one, was still silent, edging down in the cover of the reef.

"There's our meat!" Pecos said.

They opened fire, their four guns sending a sudden hail of twenty-four slugs into the unprotected rear of the column.

It brought a mad scramble for cover. They could hear Cole Addis cursing his men, ordering them to make a stand.

Some of them did. Others, running, had exposed themselves to the rifles and shotguns of the teamsters. Organization vanished. Even those who first obeyed

(Continued on page 125)

By
GIFF
CHESHIRE

The gun spoke sharply in the frozen night.

COLD TRAIL

A cool hundred thousand in gold bullion and a sloe-eyed frontier girl with a gun—where could Birch pick a more troublesome pair of mule-train companions this side of hell?

THE MULE TRAIN was ready to hit the trail when Darcy Birch reached the packer's corral at the edge of Browntown. The mining camp, grown quiet at last, lay half buried in drifted snow. Bent against the freezing dawn wind, Darcy carried a valise, creating an incongruous figure in his fur great coat and cap when he came into the lantern light.

Adjusting a stirrup for a saddle passenger, Bill Thresher, the packer, swung a surprised look at Darcy, his attention focusing on the valise. Darcy saw the man's daughter stare at him in quick wonder. Another passenger had straightened

in the saddle, but Darcy paid him no heed.

"Howdy, Birch," Thresher grunted. "Out early, ain't you?"

Darcy smiled. "Call it up late. I haven't been to bed. Got a horse for another passenger to Crescent City?"

Thresher started. "You going out? Birch, I wouldn't advise it, unless you got to. It was real mean comin' in. Might be worse goin' out, if we get out at all."

Darcy shrugged. "Which horse do I take?"

"Well, that bay yonder, then." Thresher raised his voice to his helper. "Joe, saddle the critter and pack this man's grip." Again he stared at Darcy, distrustful and worried.

The lean, handsome face of Darcy Birch had been well-trained in impassivity during the years he had sat at gaming tables throughout the gold-flecked Sierras and these Southern Oregon hills. He was used to men suspecting and disapproving of him—any gambler got that way or quit the business.

Had he been less self-contained, he would have grinned at this morning's uneasiness. There had been an elaborate effort at secrecy, but it hadn't been hard to decide that a gold-dust shipment was going out by this packstring.

Three days earlier Thresher's outfit had brought in the first mail and supplies in a number of weeks. For a long while before that, stage schedules had been indefinite because of the continuing snows. The Crescent City trail ran high in the mountains and deep in the canyons, a three or four day ordeal at the best.

DAY FOUND them threshing slowly toward the main California trail. By now Darcy had got a better look at his trail mates, who had made him so openly unwelcome. The packer himself was middle-aged, a tall, heavy built man with a rugged face and steady eyes. Darcy recognized one of the saddle passengers as a little whiskey drummer who, like himself, had been held in Browntown for weeks by the storms.

The third passenger gave Darcy some surprise. It was the express company's agent at the mining camp. He was young, thin-faced and uneasy looking, and he must have come along to keep his eye on the gold dust the company bought locally and shipped to the San Francisco mint.

They were as yet in gently rolling country, park-like with its scattered pine. Thresher rode the point, breaking trail through a fresh overlay of snow. Strung out because of their floundering, the pack animals extended a half mile back. The helper worked along the flanks, while Nora Thresher rode in the tramped drag with the three saddle passengers.

Darcy let himself drop back a distance. As he hoped, Nora soon fell behind to see what had caused him to slow down.

He smiled at her. "Even if I hadn't figured it out for myself, Miss Thresher," he said pleasantly, "I'd know from your worry that you're taking gold dust out."

Her eyes widened. "Since you're being blunt, we're nervous because we realized you knew. You're not exactly a stranger, Darcy Birch. Dad watched that big game, last night. You parted with a small fortune, I hear. He was telling us about it just before you showed up this morning."

"So you're wondering if I'm trying for a new stake," Darcy murmured. "I lost ten thousand, last night. Do you have that much in dust?" His level eyes laughed at the girl, causing her to set her face in annoyance.

She was dark, lithe in the saddle, as attractive a woman as he had seen out here. The wildness of the trail set her off well, reminding him he was still young. In his business, a man grew so detached he lost the consciousness of himself as flesh and blood.

"With a mind like yours, you should be able to appraise it to the last ounce,"

Nora said tartly, turning her head.

"The ability to appraise is worth having," Darcy retorted.

"I'll stand on mine. And I'm glad we've been so frank. You're suspected, not only by me but by Dad and Vince Greenbow."

"The express agent? I gathered that he's guarding the shipment. And not looking too easy about it."

Nora's face had darkened with anger. "Can you make this register in that clever mind of yours? If you make a false move, you'll be dropped in your tracks."

Darcy grinned. "Sometimes I dream of being the dashing fellow you have in mind. Capable, for example, of throwing down on an outfit this size, then thundering off through the snow with gold dust to spend in the flesh pots. Somehow I never seem to measure up to it."

"What kind of fools do you take us for?" Nora asked hotly. "We're not exactly green at this business."

"I didn't say so. But you do make up your mind too fast."

Nora Thresher became very polite. "Please catch up with the others. I'm responsible for the passengers. I like them where I can watch them."

"I'd like it the other way round, ma'am," Darcy murmured, but he obliged.

IT WAS slow and heavy going. By mid-day it seemed to Darcy that they had covered no more than six or seven miles. When they came to the main California trail they found it no better broken. In late afternoon Thresher swung the packstring off the trail into a heavy stand of mixed pine and redwood that offered shelter. There they made camp for the night.

In the bleak cold of the upland twilight some of the outfit's tension seeped into Darcy. Regularly, on these wilderness trails, pack outfits accommodated saddle passengers to and fro. In her combined duties as conductor and cook, Nora was kept as busy as the packers. The whiskey drummer volunteered to help her at the supper fire, but she discouraged him.

Greenbow, the express agent, stuck close to the fire. Darcy had seen apprehension in too many men not to recognize it in this one. From time to time he sensed the weight of Greenbow's study but gave no sign of it. Darcy's own attention preferred to linger upon Nora.

She was as tall and slim as he had hoped. In spite of the rough life she lived, her manner was wholly feminine and fastidious. He liked her very much and time after time felt a pang of regret that she had judged him so quickly and completely.

Darcy sauntered off a distance at bedtime and was amused when Greenbow followed him quickly.

In a clipped, cold voice, the express agent said, "Birch, I can't figure out why you came along."

"What's so strange about it? In my game we have a feeling that a change of pasture means a change of luck. Mine can only change for the better, as you must have heard. It let me down for everything except travel money, last night."

"I heard," Greenbow snapped. "What I'm wondering is how you intend to change your luck. You consort with shady people in your line. You wouldn't have help spotted somewhere along the line waiting for your signal, would you?"

"Everyone seems to think so, friend. Excepting the whiskey drummer, maybe. He hasn't yet warned me of what'll happen if I make a funny move. Let's go back to camp, Greenbow. You've made me nervous."

It was a cold, miserable night. Though he had his fur coat and a few smelly saddle blankets, Darcy wakened several times before morning, each time noting that one of the pack outfit was awake and on guard. That was only smart, but he

wished their attention was focused less heavily upon himself. It was obvious that lethal results could follow a sudden move, which a man might make accidentally.

They trailed through a long, hard day, crossing into California and the wild, high meadows of the Siskiyou summit. It was slow, draining progress. They reached the rock-walled gorge of Smith River, finally, and came to a narrow river bottom that night. Tension was high in the group, with even Darcy feeling it more and more.

He rode forward to find Thresher sitting his horse in motionless study, the packstring slowing to a willing stop behind. Far ahead lay a broad thicket, touching the river, with the trail skirting the opposite side. Smoke lifted from a depth within the copse, apparently from a campfire. It could be an inbound party halted for the night, though that seemed unlikely.

"Injun camp," Thresher grunted. "They come through here once in a while. Peaceful sometimes. Again they ain't."

"Would they camp so close to a white man's trail?" Darcy asked.

"They built the trail. And there they are. Well, we'll go by and see."

THE STRING threshed on. It apparently was what Thresher had decided. Though not plainly visible, Darcy detected three or four blanketed figures about a campfire, well within the brush. Horses were picketed farther in.

"Redskins, all right," Thresher grunted. He looked relieved.

The packer took the string on for another two wallowing miles. Then they made camp by the river at a point where a canyon wall gave high protection on either side, leaving only the trail itself to be watched. The packers unsaddled the mules, got them picketed and in their nose bags.

The packs, by the campfire, had grown pregnant with meaning to Darcy. Some of it was camp equipment and grain for the animals. Some of it was the passengers' luggage. But in there somewhere was what probably amounted to a young fortune in gold dust.

The whiskey drummer watched his chance and got Darcy aside.

"Birch, I don't like this. When we came past that camp back there, Greenbow fell back a little. I wondered and sneaked a look at him. He pulled off his hat and whipped it on his knee like he was beating off snow. But it hadn't been snowing. Then he pulled it on and looked real quick to see who'd seen him. Nearly swallowed his teeth when he seen me looking at him. Now, why all that?"

Darcy's eyes went bleak. "Why, indeed? Did you tell Thresher?"

"Yeah. Just a while ago. And he laughed at me. I guess he's right. The express company owns the gold dust, and Greenbow's their agent."

And in a fine position to know when a shipment goes out, Darcy thought, but he said nothing.

Bill Thresher hadn't unsaddled his horse. Presently he mounted and rode forward and was gone for a long while. When he returned he looked grave.

"Well, we're in trouble. Snow slide ahead has covered the trail. Mebbe we can climb around, but more mebbe we'll have to turn back. We'll see in the morning."

That's it, Darcy thought, and he went cold. We're in a canyon cut half way to blazes. Blocked ahead by a slide. With some fake Indians behind us. Even the clever Birch had no better sense than to ride in past that camp.

"If we're alive in the morning," Nora said flatly, and Darcy realized she saw through it, too. Perhaps the others did. Darcy had never found himself surrounded by a more somber group. Then pain stabbed through him when Nora

met his eyes and held them for a long moment. For the first time he could not hold her at an easy distance with his bland smile, his professional front. This Nora had got through to him.

LIGHT faded swiftly. When supper was over, Darcy rose suddenly and looked at the others. "I'm going back a ways. When it's dark enough I want a good look at that Indian camp."

"Oh, no, you won't," Greenbow said emphatically. He shoved to his feet.

"Think it's a fake?" Thresher asked Darcy. "Or do you know it is?"

"I know it is." Darcy smiled at Greenbow. "Come along."

The man looked uncertain, then shrugged. "All right, let's do."

They rode most of the way, then swung down and concealed their horses. Thereafter they kept to the brush skirting the river. Night was deepening about them. At length they could see the campfire, ahead in the river copse.

It was a frank, open enough camp, though much of its detail was lost in the intervening foliage. Darcy had been struck at the start by the fact that there were no squaws, children or dogs, inevitable characteristics of an Indian travel party.

They crept closer, Darcy never allowing Greenbow to fall behind him. He had a small gun in the big pocket of his greatcoat, and he had slipped off the glove of that hand. Greenbow wore a holstered gun, swung to his hip. The express agent was silent, jumpy.

Darcy was only mildly surprised when a voice barked at them suddenly, coming from a deep brush clump ahead.

"Stand, gents, and shove up your arms."

Darcy obeyed, hearing Greenbow's heavy breath. "Take it easy with that gun, Balt," the agent gasped worriedly. "There was a complication. We've got a man to tend to. He was fool enough to want to come down here and check."

"I'd have staked another ten thousand on it," Darcy breathed. "You were too jumpy for a healthy fear, Greenbow."

"What's your game, Darcy?" Greenbow demanded. "If you figured to turn a double play on this, you were crazy."

"I figured," Darcy answered, "on getting part of it settled away from the Thresher camp. There happens to be a lady there, Greenbow. Or do you love wealth so much you never noticed? But they're all good people, trusting the wrong man."

"You're the one they distrust, Birch. Which makes it like I want it. I'll have the right kind of story to tell. For instance, it was your scheme to spot some men here, like Indians—men who'd already dynamited a slide to close the trail ahead. Making a death trap, Birch. Which it will be for you. Because you're going to be found dead when it's over."

"At least not scared to death, Greenbow." Darcy grinned at him, but it was only the old professional front to cover the icicles hanging from the pit of his stomach.

Greenbow was growing confident. "What happens to the Threshers depends on how much of a fight they put up. If they're sensible, I'll ride back to Browntown with them tomorrow, and with my cut of the dust."

The man Balt had not exposed himself. His gravelly voice came, then. "Come in, gents. Toward the firse."

Darcy obeyed, Greenbow stumbling beside him through the heavy drifts of snow. Once Darcy fell purposely, and when he rose he brushed himself, then casually thrust his hands into his pockets as if for warmth. Behind them, Balt offered no objection, apparently trained to expect a gun to ride a man's hip or shoulder holster.

The flimsy Indian disguise had been dropped at the camp. Three men at the

fire were watching with interest. Darcy knew their kind, furtive men whose lives were spent on the backtrails. They were men shunned by decent elements, and for that reason arrogant and dangerous. The Indian blankets lay scattered about.

In the firelight Darcy got a look at Balt, who had a puzzled frown on his swarthy face. He was big, bearded, with a pair of cold, sunken eyes. His gaze was on Greenbow.

"Kid," Balt said, "there's no good reason for us to cut with you, at all. Two dead men would make somebody a better story than one. And with a canyon full of same, there'd be no story or anybody to tell it."

Had he been less sick in his own middle, Darcy would have been amused at Greenbow's start of raw fear. "Why, you devil!" the agent breathed. "After all your promises!" Outrage impelled him to take a step toward Balt, who steadied his gun in warning.

DARCY knew he had to take help where he could find it. Maybe Greenbow would fight for his own life. Darcy had eared the hammer of his pocketed gun. Without outward warning he sent a blind, prayerful shot through the fur. His eyes went bleak when he saw Greenbow bolt, bent on the darkness and escape.

Balt staggered, his exploding gun sending a bullet that whistled above Darcy's head. The men at the fire swung out into the darkness. Balt took a half-step, then fell into the snow. But Dercy saw only the start of it, for he was himself driving for the darkness.

He wallowed until he found the sheltering trunk of a tree. Three guns were firing now, and he could see the streaks of flame. He held fire, thinking. They were shooting at sound, and he could hear the crash of brush, receding rapidly on the far side of the camp.

Greenbow was driving for the horses. He meant to get back to the Thresher camp and the greater help it afforded, for he knew he had to fight for his life, with his dream of quick wealth shatered. Darcy might have felt sorry for him had Greenbow been less ready to expose Nora to this.

The crackling guns rocked the copse, but Darcy still refused to disclose his position by firing. A congealing thought filled his mind. If I fight here, they're sure to finish me. Greenbow'll tell that yarn. And Nora will always believe it.

He could no longer hear the sound of the agent's progress. Greenbow had cleared the brush and was running through the soft snow. Darcy hoped one of the outlaws had taken after him but doubted that.

Darcy began to slip away. Instead of trying to move along the river, as Greenbow had, he swung out toward the trail. The firing behind continued, and it would be several minutes before they would break off and devote attention to the packer camp.

Darcy slid swiftly across the trail and began to dart through the bed of large boulders at the base of the cliff. At what he judged to be the right distance, he recrossed and dropped down to where the horses had been left.

He grinned bleakly. In his haste to get away, Greenbow had swung up and gone, leaving the other mount where it stood. Darcy lifted himself quietly into the saddle and moved away. The shooting in the copse had petered out. There were three able-bodied men there and three at the packer camp. The outlaws wouldn't attack until they had talked it over and made some kind of a plan.

He wasn't surprised when he was challenged as he drew near the packer camp. Thresher's hostile voice called, "Darcy, I can make out your furry shape, you curly wolf! Get back with your pack and bring on your fight!"

"Did Greenbow get back?"

"Greenbow's here. The Lord be thanked he got away from you devils."

"Then I'll have to serve as your advance guard, Bill," Darcy called. Dismounting, he slapped his horse to send it on into the camp, then burrowed himself in the snow.

There was no approaching by stealth, and the outlaws didn't try it. Darcy was chilled to the bone by the time he detected horses coming in, far down the trail. He tensed, wondering if they would charge mounted or work up on foot through the snow. The latter seemed likely, since the underfooting was treacherous.

Presently the moving shapes came on closer, and he knew they had chosen the slower but safer course.

The outland canyon grew intensely lonely. But Darcy was banking on Thresher's refusal to let him come in to the camp. He remained inert, his dark coat buried in the snow. He had kept himself beyond gun-range of the hostile packer camp. The bandits would try to work in this close before opening fire. He might give them something of a start.

The men came on, bent low but exposing themselves openly since their attack was fully expected. Darcy waited until they were close enough for his small gun to be effective. He hoped to get one of them before the others took cover, to root them out if he could thereafter. He was very, very fond of Nora.

At last he drew a careful bead and fired at the man in the middle.

The gun spoke sharply in the freezing night. He saw his man stumble forward, then sink down. The others spread wider, flinging themselves flat. Darcy rose, aware that a packer rifle, such as rode the boot of Thresher's saddle, could get him through the back.

He drove toward the man on his right, away from the cliff and its detritus. A figure shoved up in desperation. Darcy saw flame bloom in the night. He fired coolly and was knocked back on his haunches. There was no pain. He just went a few degrees colder. The fellow out there fired again, and now Darcy numbly dug himself deeper.

He was hit in the shoulder, and inertia was a burden he could not lift. His head sank down, and he knew he would

He was the whelp of a feud-cursed union. . . . Would he side the hard-riding, fast-shooting brood of his sire . . . or the high-spirited, hot-blooded clan of his mother?

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die no matter who triumphed in the fight. They all considered him an enemy. But Darcy found a smile had climbed to his lips. It was a smile of gratification. This was a nice thing to do for the girl of the upland trails, with whom he had fallen in love so suddenly, so completely.

Gunfire was bristling out from the packed camp. Darcy could hear the distinctive crack of Thresher's rifle.

He watched and presently saw snow tumbling slightly, the way earth moves when a mole works near the surface. Darcy managed to sit up and see darkness against the white over there. The snow kept shoving a little, ahead of the shape. Darcy targeted it carefully and fired another shot. There was no more movement there, but a shot came in from his right and kicked snow on him.

Darcy swung the gun. He couldn't locate the man. The gun swayed a little. Then abruptly he toppled forward, burying his face in the snow, thinking, What a way to die. I'll smother. But I can't move.

WHEN he opened his eyes there was firelight in his face. There was no shooting. He felt sweaty blankets under him and more over him. Darcy looked up to see Greenbow glaring down at him. Beyond him stood Thresher, with a vacant frown on his face.

He couldn't see Nora, nor the packer's helper, nor the whiskey drummer. He wondered if the drummer had his sample case in the packs. Darcy had a feeling he could use a little help from it.

Darcy met Greenbow's glaring eyes. "I see you came through unscratched. You must have found a good high rock, somewhere."

"And you'll live to do time, Birch."

"Where's Nora?" Darcy asked.

"Here," her voice said, from beyond the top of his head where he couldn't see her. "What have you got to say for yourself?"

"What has Greenbow told you?"

"That he spoiled your trap by bringing warning."

"Do you believe that?"

"No. My ability to appraise a man is faulty, I admit. But I've got the sense to do a reappraisal when I'm proved wrong."

Greenbow started to make a wild swing, but from behind him Thresher's mild voice said, "Stand right there, Greenbow. I've got a revolver lookin' your way. Nora, tell 'em what changed our minds."

"Easy," Nora said. "When Darcy Birch started shooting, he picked a different direction than the one we expected."

"Be very sure, Nora," Darcy breathed. "Because you're going to have courting on your hands if you don't send me to prison. Your father might even have to take me into the packing business."

Darcy heard Thresher's chuckle. "If you could see her face, you'd know that don't scare her any."

"Let me see your face, Nora."

It came into view then, and it was smiling. Darcy smiled back, and saw from the way hers deepened that his own had been altered. It didn't cover him now but exposed him completely. He was glad of that. And he knew that she was as glad as he was.

Even Thresher seemed pleased. "Nobody hurt on our side, Birch, and they're all wiped out. After this, I recken we can get over that slide, tomorrow. And find out what the express company wants to do with Greenbow. From the way he's shakin' I don't reckon it'll be hard to get the truth outta him. You listenin', Birch?"

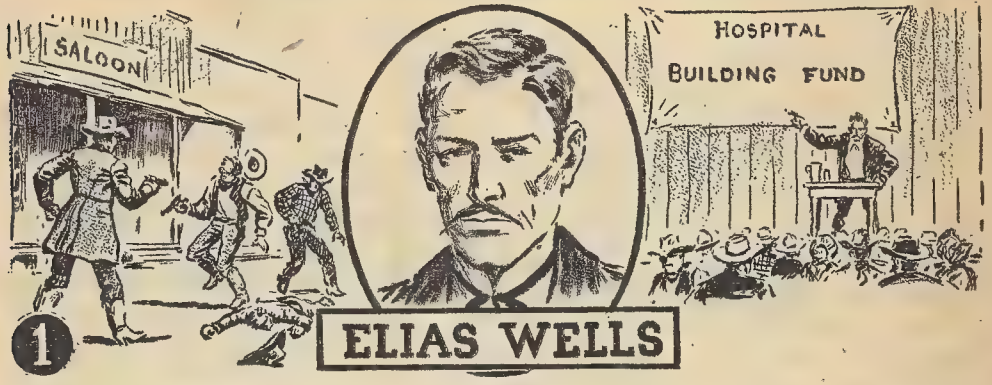
"Certainly," Darcy answered.

"What did I say?"

"That Nora isn't afraid of me any more. I heard it plainly."

BUILDERS OF THE FRONTIER

by NICHOLS and ROSS



1 ELIAS WELLS

Strangely enough one of the West's greatest heroes was an easy-going, mild-mannered man who regarded sixguns as the devil's weapon. In Caldwell, Texas, Elias Wells was accused of being a weak-kneed, trigger-shy coward who was afraid to carry a gun. While other men made notches in their irons, Elias spent his time trying to collect money for a hospital that Caldwell needed.

2 Caldwell knew that it was justified in calling Elias a coward when he refused to join up with the rest of the youths at the outbreak of the Civil War. Elias announced calmly that although he was strong for the Southern cause he would take no part in killing. His father, a retired Army Colonel, joined with the rest of the townsfolk who insisted that Elias enlist or hang from a cottonwood.

3 "You win," Elias announced and he left for the front. There he signed up as a male nurse. It wasn't too long before the people back in Caldwell started hearing stories about "that coward afraid to fight." Under fire, he carried ten men off the field at Bull Run. At Vicksburg, although he had been badly wounded, he saved fifty more. At Chancellorville he lost his right leg, but he continued to help the wounded and saved the life of the famous Confederate General Lewis Hooker.

4 A brass band greeted the returning veteran. The people who had once scorned him were now lifting him on their shoulders. They admired his medals and presented him with the key to the city but Elias hadn't changed. When they asked him to make a speech he announced loudly, "We still need that hospital." This time they were behind him. Nine months later a shiny new building to aid the sick was erected in Caldwell. Inscribed above the door was the town's tribute: "We was all fools, Elias, but we learned some and we're sorry."

Feud of the Doomed

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With an earth-jarring crash, he went over.

It had taken years of seething hatred to build the Bard-Tierney blood-feud into this hell-hot beans-and-bullets war. But it would take only one gunsmoke second for Hugh Bard to end it forever. . . .

A Smashing Range-War Novelette

By

ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY

CHAPTER ONE

The Enemies

HUGH BARD was born to it. One of his early memories, stark and terribly vivid, was the shooting he had seen in the dusty street of Fort Hull. He had been seven then, walking by the side of the shaggy, god-like giant who was his father.

The face of the man who had come strolling at them was vague in his mind,

but he remembered the sudden, cruel pain of his hand as his father gripped it. Then his father had sent him reeling to one side with a sharp stiffening of his arm.

Lying, crumpled against a building front, bewildered, hurt, he had stared uncomprehendingly as the calm weight of the afternoon quiet was ripped apart by the shocking blast of gunfire. He had seen his father clap both hands to the pit of his stomach, incline forward at a sickening angle, and then pitch down on his face.

He had darted out in the street, he remembered, trying to turn his father over so his face would not be in the dirt. But his little strength had not been able to achieve that, and his hands had grown slippery. While he was still struggling there, men had come surging in around him, jostling him aside.

Someone had growled: "Take the kid out of this!" And another: "Dyin', I reckon. Shot plumb through the guts."

They had pulled him away, fighting and screaming that his father was not dead, that he could not be dead.

And his words, shouted out in the agony of his boyish terror, proved to be true. The iron strength of Zachary Bard, aided only slightly by the crude ministrations of the army surgeon, pulled him through. But it was weeks before he could walk again, and when he could, the man who had shot him was gone.

While Zachary Bard convalesced on a hospital cot, Hugh Bard learned that his father hated one man with a hatred so deep that his bearded face hardened into a bleak, metallic mask at the thought of him. It was something which at first Hugo did not understand. At seven, he hated no one.

But as he watched his father's face and heard the low rumble of his heavy voice, he felt frightened, as if some terrible unseen presence were in the room. Automatically, he clenched his small fists when Zachary ground out that name with deep and contained fury. Loe Tierney. Loe Tierney was a man to be hated—and eventually to be dealt with.

That was the start of it for Hugh Bard. Nor was it a thing he ever forgot. He and his father left Fort Hull eventually, pushing westward. When they both stripped down on some blistering night, or when they bathed together, Hugh could see the scar—a puckered white gash—on Zachary's hard-muscled stomach. The scar had a certain horrible fascination for him. Loe Tierney had done that. Sometime the same thing must be done to Loe Tierney.

Zachary Bard was one of those massive men who would fight the devil if someone would guarantee him a hand-hold. With a tawny mass of uncut hair and beard, he stood some six-feet-three inches in his boots, and moved with the ferocious speed and power of a lion.

He was a restless man, pushing forever against the frontier as it expanded, hunting a range which would suit his strength to grapple with. He wanted no squatter's two-by-four outfit, hemmed in, choked. He was seeking a new and mighty range, and he dreamed of a hundred thousand cattle under his own brand—a brand to be passed along to his son.

In the meantime he toiled at the hardest jobs the frontier offered. And he saved his money. Zachary Bard was dreaming of empire, and he had the fighting heart to get what he wanted. He became well known as a man dangerous to cross, a man cool-headed in the gravest emergencies, a man who did much while speaking but little.

Small wonder that Hugh, growing up in the shadow of such a figure, should admire his father with a fiercely intense loyalty and love. Small wonder, too, that he should accept as inevitable and proper the thought of hating Loe Tierney with a deadly hatred.

HUGH was ten and Zachary was whacking bulls on the Santa Fe trail when they met Loe Tierney again. Zachary's train was west-bound, while Tierney's was headed back east. They came together suddenly, without warning, at one of the night fires. Neither being armed at the time, they set out to kill each other with their fists.

It was the first time that Hugh had seen this man who was linked so harshly with his thoughts. Loe Tierney was more slender than Zachary Bard, but a shade more supple, a trace more quick. He was handsome, though his face was pale and marked with a sternness which hinted at grim depths. In his eyes there was a smouldering, angry fire. There was no fear in him.

Even Hugh, crouched and panting at the edge of the firelight, could feel as if it were a tangible force the fierce eagerness with which he went into the fight.

It was a fight which is still spoken of when old-timers of the trail meet over pipes and whiskey glasses. They will tell you how Loe Tierney threw Zachary Bard ten feet into the very middle of the leaping fire.

And how Bard, with the back of his torn shirt blazing, sprang out of it looking like a fiend charging from the mouth of hell.

How Tierney broke Bard's collar bone with a case of canned peaches, and how Bard caught Tierney by the throat with his one good hand, holding his grip though his face was battered into a bloody welter. Tierney would have died then had not other freighters from the east-bound train intervened. They pulled Zachary Bard away from his senseless victim, and a general fight broke out between the crews of the two trains. The wagon bosses of the already undermanned outfits, fearful of further depletion, stopped the battle with cracking blacksnakes.

At dawn the two outfits plodded away from the spot, one to the east and the other to the west.

Hugh Bard was old enough then to understand the meaning behind the thing. It was a Bard feud, and his fight as much as his father's. That much Zachary told him, growling the words out in short, terse phrases. But more than that, silent Zachary would not reveal. The secret of the feud, the bitter reason for its birth, never passed his locked and bearded lips.

On another point, too, Zachary Bard was grim and silent toward his son. Hugh knew nothing of his mother. During the long days and nights they spent together, riding side by side during the monotonous routine of the day's drive or hunched together over camp fires under a black sky, Zachary Bard never spoke of his wife. Questions brought only a blank stare, a tightening of the leathery features under his tawny beard. Hugh learned not to ask him.

As the frontier bulged to the west, the two followed it. Zachary Bard was aging and Hugh was beginning to feel the vigor of young manhood. From his father he learned the handling of carbine and pistol, the art of training a pony to range work, the tricks of bringing a herd through a hard winter without loss.

No man was Zachary's master at these things, and the skill which was natural to him he passed on to Hugh. The man taught with a solemn intentness, while the boy learned with an avid swiftness. Behind it all lay the unspoken knowledge that sometime those talents would be directed against Loe Tierney.

Then, at last, Zachary Bard found the range he had been looking for. They had traveled as far as they could go into the sinking sun, and backed up against the mighty, snow-capped Cascade Range, they stopped for good.

They chose the hills rather than the plain below. The range was better—lushly grassed valley shielded from the weather

by towering pine palisades—and there was less danger of encroachment. The money they had saved went into the herd, and with the same steady inevitability he had displayed throughout his life, Zachary Bard went about realizing the ambition which had driven him so relentlessly. Hugh Bard was seventeen then.

Three years is a short enough time in which to build up a brand, but at the end of that time the Bards had a beginning which promised bigger things to come. The Pot-Hook iron was becoming a factor in the new cattle country of the Northwest. Other settlers, anxious to duplicate the Pot-Hook's success, drifted into the territory. A straggling town sprang into existence at the base of the hills.

IT WAS in the fall of the fourth year that Loe Tierney came. He had prospered in the intervening years, and he came with a great herd before him, to stay. Perhaps it was by accident that he chose the Bard range, perhaps it was with grim purpose. Loe Tierney never said.

Time tends to drain the hot impetuousness out of a man, though it may not dull the edge of a deep resolve. At this, the third instance of their meeting, Loe Tierney and Zachary Bard did not flare into instant action. Yet Hugh, watching his father's face intently, saw that the implacability of his hatred had not dimmed.

Something of that same strong undercurrent of feeling was transmitted to Hugh's own veins. He knew that this time the feud would be run through to its finish. There was no hurry. Both men had reached the heights of power. Sometimes there are more satisfying ways of healing an old wound than by taking a man's life outright..

Because the Bards had a firm hold of the mountain range, Loe Tierney settled on the plain. He drove a crew of twenty riders from daylight to dusk. The Spade outfit boomed on the prairie, like a buttress hemming the Bards into the hills. Then Loe Tierney set methodically to the task of smashing the Pot-Hook.

CHAPTER TWO

Guns of the Feudists

THE NEXT five years saw ruin and tragedy sweeping like a burning blast of vengeance over a cattle range which had promised peace and affluence.

Zarchary Bard had settled himself in the mountains as a mountain steer settles himself in a coulee head to beat back the attack of wolves.

And at the end of five years both the Pot-Hook and the Spade spreads were rotting hulks, stripped of their power, nothing more than skeletal relics of their former strength. The barns and corrals of the Pot-Hook were tumbling in early dilapidation.

Only a scattered handful of cattle roamed the pine-rimmed valleys of the lower hills; the rest had gone to pay gun wages. Where a score of riders had swung their loops, there remained only Hugh and Zachary and a lame cook.

In the same manner the scourge of the long-drawn feud had struck the Spade. Loe Tierney was left with a miserable remnant of his great herd and a single oldster who chored in loneliness among the deserted buildings of the outfit.

Of the three men, Hugh Bard was hurt the most. He saw the Pot-Hook shrink and wither around him. He had the savage energy of his father, the same fierce yearning for accomplishment, yet the satisfaction of building and the joy of achievement were denied him. The feud bitterness had eaten into him. He wanted to kill Loe Tierney more than he wanted any other one thing.

The rest of the range had suffered along with the Pot-Hook and the Spade.

Harried by continual strife, for a time it had split into factions. Then other matters had plunged the other, smaller outfits of the range into a struggle to save themselves.

Attracted by the troubled conditions rustlers and desperados swooped down to prey on the country. The hired gunhandlers, cast off for lack of funds, remained to plunder what they could.

The Pinnacle Rocks country, a rugged strip a dozen miles north of the Pot-Hook, became the natural rendezvous for the outlaws. From there the renegades struck and into its rocky fastness they retreated. For the most part they operated without serious molestation. The two big ranches which might have checked them, the Pot-Hook and the Spade, were at war.

The other cattlemen placed the blame on the shoulders of the Bards and of Loe Tierney. The feud was ruining not only the two outfits concerned, but the rest of the range as well. Under the scorn and abuse which found its way to him, Hugh Bard could only lock his jaws tightly and promise himself that Loe Tierney would eventually pay for all that he had done. He and his father and Tierney were outcasts. He knew that.

With both sides on the ragged edge of bankruptcy, their forces spent, the feud simmered while they were gathering strength for a fresh attack. During that time Hugh married. Jed Lister, one of the neighboring ranchers and the girl's father, opposed the match bitterly. He wanted none of a son-in-law who was involved so violently in the Bard-Tierney feud. He himself had been almost ruined by it already. Reckless and defiant, Hugh Bard overrode the objection. He loved Kay Lister. She was the one ray of peace and hope in his bleak world of disappointment.

Kay Lister was no ordinary girl, for no ordinary girl would have married Hugh Bard. She was tall and dark, with an elusive beauty which defied classification. She spoke rarely, and when she did it was with a straightforward calmness which compelled attention. Hugh was never able to conquer the feeling of awe he experienced when he was with her.

THEY did not live at the now barren Pot-Hook ranch house. For the first time in his life Hugh had a desire to escape from the great brooding frame of old Zachary Bard, who talked less as the years rolled by and drew more within himself, nursing his enmity for Loe Tierney. They fitted up one of the old line shacks, and the first two months Hugh spent there were as happy as any in his life.

He was with his father at dusk one night, in front of the yawning rock fireplace, when Zachary flung an abrupt statement at him. "You've never asked me what Loe Tierney done."

Startled, Hugh stared at his father's hunched shoulders. Zachary Bard still had the frame of a giant and his iron strength had not deserted him. The tawny hair of former years had turned white, the fierce, straight-gazing eyes had receded in his head, and hollows had deepened under his beard between his cheekbones and jutting jaw.

His will and his physical power he had still, but something had gone out of him. Pity shocked through Hugh Bard as he stared at this man, his father, whose dream of empire had been shattered, now never to be rebuilt.

"When I was a kid you wouldn't tell me," said Hugh slowly. "Since then, I been waiting."

The old man's shoulders quivered slightly. "A man forgets." He spoke slowly, with long pauses between his sentences. "You're getting married made me wonder. Women don't see things a man's way, Hugh. They're different. Things that got to be done, they let lie. Remember what I'm telling you now. Don't let

nothing—nothing I say—come in the way of your settling, if I can't."

"I'm a Bard," Hugh said softly. "You got my word, Dad."

Old Zachary's deep-set eyes were fixed on the fire which flickered as it died on the hearth. It seemed hours before his low rumbling voice broke in again upon the stillness.

"Loe Tierney and me bunked together when we was yearlings. I'd have cut off a hand for him, and he'd have done the same for me, I reckon. Then I married your mother.

"Loe Tierney lived with us, like he was a brother." Old Zachary's voice dimmed to huskiness. "Maybe I was too happy with your mother. It was more'n my share. When she was carrying you, she took sick. Having you, the doc said, wouldn't be like with most women. There'd have to be an operation. She'd have to get to a big hospital where there'd be the right care.

"It would take money, more money than we'd ever seen, and we had a little more'n a month to get it. Loe and me started out—he swore he'd help, d'you see? We might have bucked the law, but that wasn't our way. We'd heard of a sheep and cattle fight to the south of us, and we headed for it. It was a mistake, that fight, but we didn't find it out till too late. We lined up on the cattle side, drawing gun pay to stamp out the sheepmen."

Hugh was leaning forward, trying in the fading firelight to read the seamed face of his father.

"There was bounties offered," Zachary Bard continued. "We got 'em. The last man of the sheep bunch was a gent named Payson—Miles Payson. He was a man, more of a man than we was then—doing dirty work for a damned land-hogging syndicate. We torched Payson's place and shot him up. We had to. He was a fighter."

The old man drew an arm across his forehead. "He didn't die. I'm glad of that. Then, with the job done, Loe Tierney pulled out."

THE OLD MAN had lunged to his feet. He clenched one mighty rock-like fist, and, straining against it, drew it up to his shoulder. His eyes were burning terribly.

"Pulled out!" he choked. "Do you see what I mean? I went to collect the money due us, and found that Loe Tierney had already got it. They showed me a receipt. He'd taken every cent coming to the both of us, the rotten-hearted dog. And so I went back to your mother—without a cent!"

There were tears wetting the white beard on old Zachary's cheeks. "She said it was all right," he whispered. "She didn't blame me for not being able to help her. She said she didn't need a big hospital. But she did. The doc tried, but he couldn't do anything. She died, and Loe Tierney killed her just as surely as if he'd held the knife instead of the doc."

"So," said Hugh, "Loe Tierney done that." Like a red devil, the feud lust was flaming in him again. He stood up, broad shouldered, strong as his father. "I'll tell Kay all this. She's a Bard now. It's a Bard fight. She'll stand behind us."

Zachary Bard made no move. He did not reply and his fierce, penetrating gaze did not swerve from the dying embers of the fire.

That night at the line cabin Hugh recounted to his wife the story which old Zachary had given him. He added to it the events which had fallen within his own lifetime—their gun duel in Fort Hull, which must have been the first meeting after the fatal episode, and the fight which had taken place when they were freighters on the Santa Fe trail.

She listened quietly, standing tall and strangely beautiful in the dimness of the

lamplight. More than ever she seemed remote, and his awe of her irritated Hugh.

"You see what I mean, don't you?" he demanded. "There can't be a question about it. Some Bard has got to down Tierney."

She stood very close to him. "It was terrible," she said. "I see that."

"And is that all?" he asked.

"No. I can see that a feud destroys a man's life. Your father has lived hating Loe Tierney. There's been nothing else for him. He's lost himself and he's lost his ranch, and now he's driving you to lose the same things."

Hugh got up. He cried, "He's done what any man but a coward would have done. He's had a debt to pay, and he's spent his life paying it."

"But there must be another way, Hugh. There must be another side to it."

"Another side," he choked. "Tierney's side? There can't be. Do you want a Bard to go crawling to Loe Tierney, asking him to lie his way out of the rotten thing he did?"

"*I* would," she said simply.

Hugh stared at her, his face working strangely. "Then—then, you're not a Bard. You *can't* be!"

Her eyes were pleading with him. "Hugh. Hugh, I love you. It's you I'm thinking of. I love you too much, Hugh." Her soft arms went out and around his neck.

He made no move to fling them down. But his words were wrung out of the agony of his soul. "You're not a Bard!"

CHAPTER THREE

Call to Battle

FROM bad, conditions on the range went to worse. The outlaws of the Pinnacle Rocks country plundered the range without hindrance. And, as their raids grew bolder, the animosity of the troubled cattlemen toward the Bards increased. The malice was not spoken openly—the Bards were too much feared for that—but it was there, simmering beneath the surface.

Hugh Bard grew as silent as his father. His handsome face took on lines of bitterness. Though the hurt it gave him was more severe than any he had known, he avoided Kay as much as he could. Often he would stay with his father for days at a time. He would return to their line cabin home sullen or defiant, but Kay never unbraided him, never questioned him.

And each time that he returned after an absence, he found that the rude little cabin had been made more comfortable in some way. There were fresh curtains at the windows, or chinks through which the wind hummed had been stopped up, or there was a new seat woven for his cane-bottomed chair.

Months slipped past. There were rumors that Loe Tierney had been sick from ptomaine poisoning. That he had recovered. That the fear of death had made him eager to settle his feud with the Bards before death overtook him.

At last, with their backs to the wall, the other ranchers of the country called a meeting to discuss ways of ridding the territory of the Pinnacle Rocks bunch.

An invitation to attend was extended to Hugh Bard only as a formality, and he knew it, but he went.

SMOKE seethed in the shabby front room of the Lister ranch house. The handful of hard-pressed cattlemen which had gathered there was pitifully small, pitifully lacking in adequate leadership.

Jed Lister, lean, gaunt-faced and bald of head, was talking with the earnestness of desperation. "Well, what's it to be?" he demanded. "Do we get stripped down to our last mangy cow without lifting a hand, or do we put up a fight?"

A little man named Moore shifted uncomfortably. "What the hell can you do? We've trailed thieves into that damned Pinnacle Rocks country before this—an' come back because it weren't healthy to stay there long."

"Cane tried it," pointed out a heavy man with a straggling yellow mustache. "And we buried him."

"I don't give a damn what happened to Cane," snapped Lister. "Me, I ain't figgerin' to sit on my haunches and watch myself bein' stole blind. I got less cows now than when I come here. We been laying off because we judged they was too strong for us. Maybe they are, but, by god, I say let's find out! It's either that or get off the range."

A big Scandinavian with pale, angry eyes lunged to his feet. "Damn it all, that's what I'm doing! Clearing out! To hell with your talk of making a fight. It ain't worth it, and you ain't got a chance of coming through."

Lister whirled on him. "It might be worth it. This range is all right. It's the men in it."

"Maybe so, but I ain't staying. I got a family. I'm going some place where a man don't have to pay for his land with bullets." He sank down, his pale eyes glaring stubbornly.

Little Moore spoke up again, fiercely. "We might have an even break if we'd all hang together. We sure as hell can't do it if we're tryin' to gun each other at the same time."

His gaze whipped across the room to where Hugh Bard was leaning by himself against the wall. The eyes of the others followed his, for the implication was clear. There was malice in their combined state—malice in which was woven scorn and a certain helpless appeal.

Hugh Bard felt it, and resented it. As if to supply a barrier against that stare, he roused the hatred for Loe Tierney which had been planted in him so early and had endured over the long years.

"If you mean you want the Bards to join up with Loe Tierney," he snarled, "forget it. When he's dead we'll ride with you, not before."

"You may not think so, Bard, but this thing is more important than your private grudges," said Lister. His voice was low and strained, as if he were making a tremendous effort to control himself. "What you've done has brought bloody hell to the rest of us."

HUGH swung away from the wall, planting his feet apart, his shoulders sagging. "When you start horning in on a Bard's affairs, you're making gun talk," he said. Something was struggling in him, warning him. He felt bitterly angry and, somehow felt, too, that he was being an utter fool.

"Forget it," Lister snapped sarcastically. "I never swapped lead with a neighbor, an' I ain't startin' now. Some time, when it's too late, I reckon, you'll figger out what a skunk trick you've pulled on yourself and the rest of this country."

The hulking rancher with the ragged yellow mustache broke the sharp silence. "I knowed Cane," he said flatly. "God knows what'll come of it, but I'll go up into that Pinnacle Rocks graveyard if the rest of you will. My spread ain't any great shakes, but to me it's worth savin'. It's all I got."

"Good man, Donovan!" Jed Lister shot at him. "I'm going if you and I are the only two in the whole damned outfit." He whirled around at the rest of the room, ignoring Hugh. "Who's with us?"

A murmur of assent mounted into a rumbling uproar. Lister was stabbing his arm at first one man and then another. "You, Moore? Good. All right, Clyde. That's four of us. Blake? No? Then go to hell—we'll see you there! Blackstone? Jenkins? Six of us, eh? Six men with sand in their craws!"

The uproar faded out as the full meaning of what was contemplated drove home. Six men, none of whom pretended to be a fighter, were heading into the Pinnacle Rocks country to wipe out the outlaw crew, or die there.

Not a man in the room but knew they would be outnumbered and pitted against seasoned gun-handlers. They were offering their lives, if need be, for a range which was scarred by inner turmoil and near to extinction.

A seventh man said quietly. "Count me in, Jed. I'll go."

Jed Lister ran a hand over his bald head which was wet with perspiration. "There'll be things most likely you'll want to tend to. Scatter out now. Come daylight we'll meet here again an' head out. Each man bring all the grub an' shells he can lay hold of."

Listlessly, as if their going were no matter, they started to drift for the door. Before they reached it Hugh Bard cried out: "Wait a minute!"

Like a flood-gate against which torrents have been hammering, something within him had broken. For a moment the oppressive burden of his hate for Loe Tierney fell from his shoulders. The red vision of the man cleared away from before his eyes. He experienced a sensation of unutterable relief. He wanted to join those men, help them.

His words rang out: "Listen, Jed. I was wrong! I'll join—"

Plummeting hoofs outside cut him off. The door crashed open and a man plunged in, shouting, "Loe Tierney got old Bard! Rode over to the ranch and plugged him. Doc Moss is on his way out."

Whatever Hugh Bard had intended to say was washed out of his mind. Old thoughts, old purposes overwhelmed him again. He leaped past the newcomer, running for his horse.

And behind him he heard Jed Lister bawling angrily: "To hell with him, then. Be there by daylight, the rest of you."

LIGHTS were beating feebly into the early night from the ranch house windows as Hugh pulled up to it. Two horses were standing hitched to the porch rail. One of them was the doctor's long-legged dun, the other he did not recognize.

He hit the ground running and his boots thudded across the creaking boards of the porch. In the open doorway he stopped abruptly, as if he had thrown himself against some invisible barricade, blank astonishment flooding over his face. Just inside crouched a stranger, gripping a sixgun which was leveled at his heart.

The man smiled thinly and without humor. "Hostile?" he queried easily.

Hugh did not move. "What's the game?" he snapped.

As his inspection flicked over the man he knew that he had never seen him before, but some uncatalogued sense sent an inexplicable warning to his brain. The stranger was of average height. In spite of that he gave the impression of exceptionally hard-muscled strength.

It was the face which seized attention instantly. It was a strange combination of bleak harshness and honesty. There was will-power in the firm lips and rocky jaw, suffering in the eyes. A bullet had at some time smashed one of his cheek-bones, and the lacking of symmetry gave an inhuman cast to his expression.

These things, with that strange hint of warning, registered on Hugh's mind in the brief second that he waited for his answer.

The stranger's shoulders lifted, and he slipped the gun back into its holster. "My mistake," he said. He brushed by Hugh and without looking around swung up into his saddle.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Doc Moss, portly and bespectacled, had emerged from the bedroom, wiping his hands on a towel, in time to take in the last of the

scene. He was staring past Hugh toward where the horseman had vanished in the darkness.

Hugh spun around. "How's dad, Doc? If Tierney—"

"Tierney shot Zack all right, but it ain't Tierney's bullet that'll kill him," Moss grunted. "It's that blamed—" He jerked his head helplessly in the direction of the door. "Better go talk to him, boy."

Zachary Bard was struggling to heave his bulk from between the blankets of the cot in his bedroom. Resembling a great bear harried by hounds, he growled in rumbling bursts, swinging his heavy shoulders, his shaggy head jerking from one side to the other. Blood-shot eyes peered from under tangled brows.

Pushing past Hugh, the doctor half urged, half swore Zachary back onto the bed. "Lie still," he commanded gruffly, "or you'll open that cut and bleed to death. I mean it." He turned appealingly to Hugh. "Keep him down. The slug went in his side, cracked a rib and stopped up against his backbone. Had to dig it out. He'll pull through, but it's still dangerous."

A growl was still echoing in the old man's throat. His gaze was fixed unswervingly on the now vacant doorway, as if a ghost, visible to him alone, had materialized there. "A long time," he whispered, "a long time to wait."

"Out of his head?" demanded Hugh sharply.

The doctor indicated a worried negative. "I don't get it. That fellow—" He broke off, swearing.

"I'd know him," old Bard stated. "That cheek of his. We done that to him."

Hugh exploded in bewildered anger. "What the hell is all this?" he shouted. "What's happened here?"

ZACHARY BARD moved his head to look at his son. Beneath the film of his white beard the great muscles of his naked chest were slowly gathering and bunching.

"Miles Payson!" he roared. "Miles Payson come back to pay off for that torchin' we done for the syndicate."

"Who?"

"Miles Payson, I tell you. The sheeper Loe and me shot up back in Texas." The old man's sunken eyes were burning. "He lied. I'm as good as I ever was. I'd have fought him here if I'd had a gun. Damn his soul to hell!"

Sweat dripped from Doc Moss's curved forehead and plump cheeks. "He come in here while I was cutting to get at the slug," he explained to Hugh, "aiming to gun Zack. Zack was bloodied up some. Couldn't move. So this Payson gent laughed and said he'd be back, when your dad got on his feet again. Zack tried to get up and fight, but he just couldn't make it."

The old man broke in. "Payson went bronc when he got well, back down there. Threw in with the wild bunch. I'd heard he was lookin' for me. You couldn't blame him, I reckon. Anyhow, he said he's been up in the Pinnacle Rocks the past year, helping break me. He'd been dealin' out misery, and now he figgers to finish it off."

Hugh crouched against the bed by his father's head. "Payson can wait," he snapped. "We got Loe Tierney to think of first. How he'd happen to down you?"

"Easy," said old Zachary. "I was setting on the front porch when he rode up. He called out an' I jumped up, turning toward him. My iron caught and he put a bullet in me."

Hugh's voice was low. "I'm going after him, Dad. I'm going out there now, tonight."

"One of us got to," answered Zachary wearily. "Seems like my lead can't touch him."

Hugh straightened. "I'll kill Loe Tierney," he said, "or I won't come

ney's gaunt face with its strange pallor leaped to Hugh's mind. He remembered, too, the eagerness with which Tierney had fought with Zachary Bard that night on the Santa Fe trail. There had been a straining fierceness about him which could not have belonged to a man who had wronged a friend and fled from him.

But those impressions barely touched the overwrought mind of Hugh Bard before they were engulfed and swept away by the thought of his wounded father. The hatred for Loe Tierney which he had been fostering for more than a decade stormed over him. It was all too strong to be dashed away at one stroke.

HE WENT white to the lips, and his big body shook with the passions which were torturing him. "Do you want me to take Tierney's word instead of my father's?" he shouted.

"Listen to me, Hugh," she begged. "Couldn't they both be right? At least in what they're thinking? There was *something* wrong about it. Think, Hugh. Maybe the syndicate double-crossed them both. Your father said himself that they made a mistake in going into it.

"Maybe the syndicate made Tierney the goat to protect themselves. They could have forged the receipt they showed Zachary, just as they could have forged the statement that convicted Tierney."

"They might have, but they didn't," said Hugh tersely. "Tierney's lying. I'm going to stop that. He'll never lie again."

Grimly he broke his glance from hers. Once again her voice, thrown after him like a silver arrow, stopped him.

"Hugh, there's something else."

He jerked around toward her, abruptly angry. "There *is* nothing else. There can't be."

Tears leaped into Kay's dark eyes—the first time he had ever seen them—and she turned so that her back was toward him. Hugh Bard walked to his wife and took her in his arms and held here close.

"I'm sorry, Kay," he said.

She relaxed against his shoulder, burying her head against his neck. The thrill that ran through him from the contact with her soft body was like the thrill of rich wine. It had been months since he had kissed her. She lay there against his shoulder, looking up at him.

"Hugh," she said, "it isn't for your sake or for mine that I want this feud to stop."

Speechless, he could do nothing but try vainly to penetrate the dusky depths which were in her eyes.

"I've been waiting," she said, "to tell you. That's why I would have done anything to—to stop it. The feud can't go on, Hugh. If it's a boy, I couldn't stand having him go through what you've gone through."

For a long time Hugh could not answer. That indefinable wall between Kay and himself had broken down. No man can look into a woman's heart without a feeling of shocked bewilderment and infinite respect, and to Hugh Bard the revelation was staggering.

For the first time he was seeing the enormity of the loyalty and love which this woman he had married held for him. He saw her utter willingness to make any sacrifice for his sake. She had risked enough when she married him; she was risking more in her desperate effort to break the feud.

Bleakly there came to Hugh a picture of a son of his own moving through grim and bloody years similar to the ones he had experienced. When he spoke at last, he said, huskily, "I wouldn't want him to."

"If Tierney wasn't lying," Kay told him quietly, "it meant that your father has been wrong all these years. He's been blaming a man who suffered as much as he did."

"It may me," said Hugh, and in his

CHAPTER FOUR

A Fighter's Woman

BY THE position of the moon Hugh judged that the time was shortly past midnight. He threw his saddle on a fresh mount in the corral, but instead of taking the east fork of the trail which would carry him down to the plain and Loe Tierney, he turned west into the hills.

It had been two days since he had seen Kay. As he pushed through the enveloping night, he tried to convince himself that he was riding to tell her what he was planning because she must learn what honor meant to a Bard. She must be hurt as he had been hurt during these last months of separation. He was riding to her with the news of his intention to kill Loe Tierney, he swore, for that reason and no other.

Actually, Hugh Bard's love for his wife had mounted rather than diminished. It had welled up in him overwhelmingly, much as he had striven to crush it. He knew well enough that he might never return from Loe Tierney's Spade outfit. If he were going to die, he wanted desperately to see Kay before he did.

He choked back that feeling as he came up to the little line shack, denying it to himself even while it sent his heart to pumping wildly and drove his breath from his lungs in panting gasps.

Light from inside streamed through the tiny curtained window. Hugh wondered suddenly if she waited up like this each night when he did not return.

He got stiffly out of the saddle and went in, stopping just inside the door. He felt awkward and somehow embarrassed at what he had come to do. Kay had been sitting down. She stood up and came a step or two toward him.

To Hugh, her dark beauty seemed more striking and vibrant than he remembered it. He might have been seeing her for the first time. In the depths of her dark eyes which were enveloping him hungrily was a disturbed pleading which he could not understand.

For a time neither spoke. Then Hugh, steeling himself, blurted hoarsely, "I came to tell you. I'm leaving to kill Loe Tierney."

She did not seem to hear him. So low that he could scarcely hear her, she said, "Hugh, there's something I—Hugh, this afternoon I went down to see Tierney."

The words staggered Hugh. "You did what?" he charged incredulously.

"Went down—to talk to Tierney," she said.

"You shouldn't have," cried Hugh savagely. "He might have hurt you." And then, ashamed that his first concern should be for her, he added bitterly, "I don't need help in my own affairs."

Her voice came more clearly. "He told me, Hugh, what happened—back there—"

"A lie. He'd be bound to lie."

"He wasn't lying, Hugh. I could tell. Any woman could have told. Hugh, you've got to listen."

He had half turned when her insistent command halted him. He waited, his eyes fastened on her. Then her words rushed out in a quick flood.

"Tierney says he didn't run away, Hugh. He didn't steal the money that was coming to them. He was arrested and held secretly, charged with burning Payson's place. He said he was convicted on Zachary Bard's testimony."

"There was no trial," Hugh flared. "Dad would have told me."

"It was secret. Someone with power enough to keep it quiet was behind it. Tierney said that when your father left the country he put a signed statement in the hands of the law, and that that statement was what sent him up. Tierney never got a cent of the money, and he spent six years in the penitentiary."

For an instant a picture of Loe Tier-

heart he believed that she was right.

Kay slipped out of his arms. When she spoke again it was as if she were asking something of him which she would not put into words. "Father came here tonight."

Hugh looked up sharply. "Then he told you—?"

"He wanted to see me. He said he might not be coming back." She uttered the statement calmly, but the meaning lay stark and deadly beneath the surface. There were seven men who were heading into the Pinnacle Rocks, knowing that they might not return. It was the havoc which the Bard-Tierney feud had brought which was forcing them to it. Clearly now, Hugh Bard saw that.

"Do you want me to go?" he demanded. "Do *you* want to?"

An enormous sense of relief charged over Hugh. He looked straight into Kay's dark, glowing eyes. "Yes," he snapped. "I've wanted to from the first, And I'll come back. I'll come back to you, Kay."

For a moment that was all too brief he kissed her with passion.

Then he had broken away and was running out to his horse. He would have to see Zachary first. He would have to explain to him.

As he swung out of the little valley which seltered the line cabin he turned in the saddle. The cabin itself had blended with the darkness, but the doorway was a faint yellow rectangle and in it Kay was standing.

HUGH pitched down over a ridge, and as his mount lined out in a swift run through the night, a new thought came to him. They would need every man for their reckless assault of the Pinnacle Rocks hideout. If the move failed, the whole range would be doomed. There was one man left among the cattlemen whose guns, whose fighting instincts, might give the raiding force a bare chance. Loe Tierney.

When he pulled up in front of the Pot-Hook ranch house the first stirring of dawn was pushing a gray haze into the east. Zachary Bard was out of bed, resting in a padded chair, waiting for him. Worried and cursing, Doc Moss was pacing the room.

"Get him back to bed," he roared at Hugh, "or he's a dead man. I won't be responsible."

At sight of him, old Zachary Bard lunged to his feet. His massive frame towered in the little room, seemingly as indestructible as the rugged face of a cliff.

"You're back, boy; you're back!" he whispered. "Loe Tierney! Did you get him?"

A terrible, hungry eagerness was blazing in his sunken eyes. Then that eagerness faded, to be superseded by a haunting doubt as he stared into the face of his son. He took a single step forward, shot out a great hand to grip Hugh's shoulder. "What's the matter with you? Damn it, what happened?"

"Sit down, Dad," said Hugh Bard. "Sit down. I got some talking to do."

He talked then, talked with a piercing intentness to the body of his father, crumpled down in the padded chair. Zachary Bard listened without speaking, without moving, his eyes closed, like a dead man.

He listened to his son pour out a story which he had lived but had not seen. A damnable story of evil and frustration and blight to a whole range. He listened while his faith in a consuming bitterness which had dominated his life was torn from under him.

The full light of day was flooding in through the window before it was finished. What has passed through the mind of Zachary Bard no one could say. What bitter sorrow, what regret, what tormenting decisions.

It was minutes after Hugh had stopped

before he opened his eyes. He gripped the arms of the chair, as if summoning that great strength which was his, and pulled himself again to his feet.

"Saddle me a horse," he said. "I'm going with you."

"What's that?" snapped the doctor.

Zachary's voice boomed. "Get me a horse, I say! I'm riding with you, Hugh."

Doc Moss spluttered wrathfully. "He's gone loco, Hugh. He'll kill himself. His back's all smashed to hell."

"Shut up!" roared Zachary. "I'm as good as I ever was. Bandage it, damn your snivelling hide! Pull it tight. A chunk of lead between his ribs don't kill a man." He was struggling out of his shirt which he had pulled over the bandage already around his body.

Denying Zachary Bard something he had set his mind on, Hugh knew, was futile. Actually, he was struck anew with his boyish admiration for the indomitable fighting heart of his father.

"By God, I won't do it," the doctor flared angrily.

"By God, you will!" the old man shouted. His bare arms flung wide and his powerful fingers locked in the portly surgeon's coat lapels. "Fix me up so I can fork leather or I'll break you in two."

Hugh broke in slowly. "Dad, I didn't tell you everything. I'm going down to get Loe Tierney. We need him."

The fingers of the old man loosened, and his weather-beaten, white-bearded face set with harsh, restrained emotion. "Loe Tierney, eh? That part you told me about Tierney I don't believe. We'll go through this together, but when it's finished—I'll make my own settlement with him."

Zachary Bard sat his horse at the edge of the Spade range while Hugh rode on to the ranch house. He said it was to spare his back, but Hugh knew that the old man could not be reconciled to peace between himself and his life-long enemy. That probably the man never would be.

HUGH had left his carbine and his short gun with his father. As he went at a walk toward the weathered main ranch building of the Spade outfit he felt the short hair at the back of his neck prickling. It was like advancing over a concealed powder cache which might explore without warning at any moment.

Hugh's inspection traveled steadily from the dead, blank surface of one window to another. He might have been riding toward a house which was a grave. There was no sound, no movement, no hint of life—nothing but an intolerable silence.

Outlined with rose and gold by the beams of the rising sun, the big building seemed to be crouching there in the midst of the vast prairie, as if waiting to spring upon him when he reached it.

The door, he noticed, was open, but it was black within and he could see nothing. He quartered as he came in front of it and stopped, so that his empty holster and saddle scabbard would be visible.

Seconds dragged with the weight of hours while he waited. The faint creaking of old boards sifted out to him and then, like the materializing of a spirit, Loe Tierney appeared in the doorway and came two steps out onto the porch.

Hugh Bard felt the cool impact of his scrutiny. A veil of brooding action hung between the two men, waiting to be unleashed. The heavy strength of it tied Hugh's tongue, stiffened him.

"Come to finish it, have you?" said Tierney softly. His lithe body was settling itself. His pale, gaunt face had not aged perceptibly. The lines had sunk more deeply into his cheeks and the look of sternness had increased—that was all.

"No," Hugh stated. "I'm hoping that there won't be a gun settlement to what lies between us."

"You think I'd let it end any other way?" Tierney cried with a sudden burst

of vehemence. "You think this can be settled by damn fool talk?"

"Maybe not, Tierney. Yesterday I'd have said the same thing. But there's something wrong somewhere. What you've been thinking and what dad's been thinking don't hook together. Me, I ain't sure any more."

"I'm sure!"

"So is Dad," said Hugh bitterly. "That ain't the point now. We've let the devil loose on this range—while we've been fighting each other. The whole country's going to hell on account of us."

"What of it?" snarled Tierney. "I've been through hell already. Let some of the rest of 'em taste it."

Cold rage settled on Hugh Bard. "They have," he snapped. Then, leaning forward in his saddle, carried away by the passion of his own feelings, he talked as he had talked once before that morning to his father.

Loe Tierney listened without flinching. When it was over his lean jaws locked. "Zack's riding with you? And him with a bullet in him?"

"He's waiting for me now."

Tierney shrugged. "I'll go. But when we're done up there—it'll be payoff for either Zachary Bard or me."

Silently, when they reached him, old Zachary Bard handed back Hugh's guns. He did not speak to Tierney nor did Tierney make any comment. They were an hour behind the dawn, and they raced straight for the Pinnacle Rocks country.

Riding slightly behind as they climbed into the hills, Hugh Bard wondered what the two old men who had hated each other for so many years were thinking.

They were riding side by side as they had done when they were young. United by a common cause, they were heading into a fight which neither might survive. A fight in which the guns of each would be protecting the other.

CHAPTER FIVE

Payoff at Pinnacle Rocks

THEY cut through the Pot-Hook range, left it behind them as they wound among canyons and cut across upflung, pine-studded ridges. High above them towered the snow-draped peaks of the Cascades, majestic and fearfully beautiful. Many of those rugged heights had never been touched by the foot of man. Somewhere below the line where the dark green of the forests beat back the encroachment of the ever-present snow, lay the Pinnacle Rocks—a barren scar slashed in the side of the mountains.

Hugh Bard swung to the ground and studied the sign they were following. The sap had not yet hardened on a twig which had snapped under some horse's hoof.

"Maybe an hour ahead of us," he said tersely. "Not more."

They pushed on without rest. Half an hour later the flat bark of rifle fire came drifting to them out of the vast quiet of the hills. Coming abruptly out of the stillness, the shots seemed to be divorced from any human agency, weirdly unreal.

Zachary Bard muttered something which was lost in the thickness of his flowing beard. The bandage wound tightly around his body made him ride with an awkward stiffness in the saddle. Loe Tierney crouched forward a little, dug spurs into his jaded mount.

The gunfire mounted to a crisp, chattering crescendo, then broke off abruptly. One rifle cracked steadily at intervals. It, too, stopped.

The trees were thinning. Jagged knobs of rock which had to be threaded made footing dangerous. Minutes later the three men came in sight of a little cabin in a hollow below them. Riders were milling in front of it while one of their number, still on the ground, knotted a strip of shirt around his arm near the shoulder.

The Bards and Loe Tierney pitched down among them at a gallop. Jed Lister's bald head snapped up. Hugh remembered wondering idiotically what had become of his hat. All Jed Lister said was, "Glad you come."

Zachary growled, "Fightin' over?"

"It's begun, but it ain't over," answered the man with the ragged yellow mustache. He pointed to three figures huddled in the dirt by the door of the shack. "If we had a chance to surprise 'em we ain't got it no more. There was four of 'em here—objected to our goin' through. One of 'em got away from us. Gent with a smashed cheek."

"Payson," muttered Zachary.

Hugh looked sharply at Tierney, but if Tierney had heard the name his face revealed nothing.

"The word'll be spread," grunted Lister somberly. "They'll be waitin' for us. We better be moving."

The man with the broken arm—little Moore, it was—clambered into his saddle. Pushing on past the cabin which guarded the trail, the cavalcade of avenging cattlemen rode into the bleak and tumbled wilderness of rock which was their goal.

Some of them, they knew, would never ride out of it alive. With tight lips men looked to the action of their guns, scanned the rearing rock walls and twisting fissures. The noon sun blazed down, hot and wrathful.

A cluster of shacks emerged in an open space as they rounded the smooth face of a projecting cliff. The string of riders bunched uncertainly.

"Here's the heart of it," said Lister.

Hugh jerked a hand toward the empty corrals at the back. "Broncs gone," he bit out. "Reckon they didn't aim to be holed up here. They cleared out."

Loe Tierney laughed shortly. "They'd rather fight in the open, that's all." He looked away to where the rock ridges sprawled off into the distance, as if flung angrily there by some mighty prehistoric hand. "They'll be waitin' for us, out there somewhere."

BEFORE pressing on, they stopped only long enough to fire the cluster of shacks. Behind them a pillar of black smoke crawled languidly into the blistering air.

Warily they went on, their thin line penetrating like the curved body of a snake into the bowels of that devil's nest. Progress was slow. Each lofty cliff face, each tumbled scrap-heap of stunted pinnacles offered a possible ambuscade.

Before he heard the snap of the explosion Hugh Bard felt the shock as a bullet struck the horse he was riding. The animal uttered a choking scream and buckled forward, rolling half over on its neck.

He bawled out, "Scatter!" as he fell, trying to wrench out his saddle gun before the dying horse made retrieving it impossible. He caught a hurried glimpse of the riders behind him fanning out to the shelter of gullies and outcroppings. Another bullet kicked up dirt half a dozen yards to his left.

Gripping his rifle in one hand Hugh slid into a depression which was already sheltering a burly, red-faced cattleman named Blake. From there he surveyed the position taken up by the outlaws.

"Suicide, tryin' to gun 'em out o' there," groaned Blake. "They're good for all winter if it suits 'em to stay."

A man along the line heard the words and chuckled. "Maybe it won't suit 'em," he called. "Put hot lead in their nosebags for a few meals an' they'll see it different."

Carefully Hugh Bard studied the possibility of assailing the stronghold which they had run in to. They had emerged through a sheer-sided defile into a natural amphitheater. At the cattlemen's end of the circle the walls reared upward immense and unbroken. The opposite end

had eroded into a rising series of buttressed ledges. Distributed among those ledges were the outlaws.

The cattlemen's one advantage, slight as it was, lay in the fact that the floor between was pitted with the dry beds of mountain torrents and littered with fallen rock. There would be some little shelter for an advance across the floor.

Hugh's mind groped instantly for a means of scaling the cliffs at either side in order to bring a raking fire down across those protecting ledges. There was none. To go back and seek a way of ascent behind the defile through which they had entered would be futile.

It might be miles before they could find one, and it would take days, on foot, to reach a spot on the cliffs parallel to the one they now occupied. The cattlemen had either to fight along the lines laid down by the rustlers or retreat.

As yet no shots other than those first two had been fired. Under the lip of a cutbank those of the cattlemen within easy crawling distance held a council of war.

"Me, I ain't a fightin' man," said Jed Lister. "What we ought to do, I don't know. But I'm here to stay." He looked without expression at Hugh Bard and Loe Tierney.

Tierney shrugged. "It's open an' shut. Pry them rats out of their holes or get killed doin' it."

Hugh nodded. "We'll do better working in pairs. One man slide ahead while the other covers him. They can't shoot without showin' themselves."

The horses were picketed back out of range, and the grim advance across the floor of the amphitheater began. Hugh Bard fell in with Jed Lister and they worked forward together. From the eroded ledges rifles began to clamor.

Little puffs of smoke bloomed in sheltered crevices, hanging in the still air against the dark face of the rock. The erratic spurts of gun thunder rocketed back and forth between the sheer cliffs, fading out only to be caught up again by a fresh burst of sound.

Slowly the distance was trimmed down. Six hundred yards, four hundred, three fifty. The scream of richocheting lead hummed shrilly through the canyon bottom.

A BULLET tore away the lobe of Jed Lister's left ear. Panting, Hugh flung himself belly down by his father-in-law's side after a sharp run of a dozen yards. Lead had dogged him every foot of the way.

"Spotted him!" he gasped. "He's usin' that v-shaped split for a rest, and he ain't moving after he shoots. Make a jump and then come back."

Jed Lister darted into the open, spun about and threw himself back to protection. Before he reached it Hugh's rifle had snarled. Behind the split a man half rose before tumbling with extended arms across the gun rest he had used a moment before. His checkered shirt made a splotch of white color against the dark rock.

But there the attack bogged down. Fifty feet to Hugh's right the yellow-mustached Donovan was cursing over a pair of smashed ribs. The fire at close range was too hot, too sure. Blackstone lay dead, sprawled in the open with the blood drying on his throat.

From the angle of his new position Hugh let his eyes rove over the confining cliffs again. To his left, what appeared to be nothing more than a thread running raggedly up the face of the escarpment resolved itself under examination into a fissure in the rock.

A harsh grin tugged at Hugh Bard's lips. "Spread the word," he directed Lister, "to the boys to hold their places and throw as much lead as they can. Keep those skunks on the ledges busy minding their scalps. When you hear shooting from above, if you do, rush 'em."

Then Hugh was off, squirming backward to a dry torrent bed which angled diagonally across the canyon bed. One man, maybe two, directing a fire at the forted outlaws from the cliff rim would be worth the whole force on the floor of the canyon.

Crouching, he went at a run down the wash until a gruff voice halted him. "Where you goin', boy?" The white head and wide shoulders of Zachary Bard emerged from an elbow of the wash. When Hugh pointed to the fissure his old head jerked in approval. "Seen that too. Maybe it's our chance. I'll go along."

Hugh's lips drew together. He could see that Zachary's wound was troubling him. The old man walked with his feet braced apart, awkwardly, as if he were having difficulty in supporting his huge body.

"It'll be a bad climb, Dad. Maybe you better stick below. One man—"

"Hell! You need a man who can shoot up there. Let's start."

Loe Tierney came suddenly into sight from the elbow. "Three of us," he said quietly.

For a moment Hugh stared at him. So Tierney and his father had paired off together, they had been guarding each other with their guns during the advance. The reason for it hit Hugh like a lightning bolt. The faces of both men were grim and devoid of expression. Each had been making sure that the other was preserved for the settlement which was to follow.

THE lull in the shooting was dissipated by a furious fusillade from the cattlemen holed up as close as they could get to the ledges. Lead hummed and chipped at the rock buttresses. The roar of chattering sound swelled through the canyon.

Shielded by that activity, the three men reached the base of the cliffs, crawled along the debris-littered base to the fissure. The gap was a great jagged rent in the solid rock, torn there by some ancient upheaval. In places it was more than twenty feet deep and as many wide. In others it twisted tortuously, narrowing to a slit the width of a man's waist.

That climb Hugh Bard never forgot. Nearly two hundred yards straight up. Before half the distance had been covered his eyeballs were burning in their sockets, his fingers became bits of stiff and bloody mechanism, the muscles of his legs screamed under the torturing strain.

But time was precious. The sun was already dyeing the sky an angry red in the west. He climbed on, clutching at flakes of rock which broke off under his grip, each step an agony of doubt pregnant with the danger that his boots would slip or that the foothold would prove insecure. His fall would carry down also the two men toiling below him.

More than once he had to stand on the shoulders of old Zachary Bard, leap for a hand-hold, and swing himself up. Then with Tierney beside him they would lower their belts and pull the old man up over some blank surface. Zachary's face grew very white and he moved slowly, but he made no complaint and he would not stop.

Faintly below them they heard the chattering bark of the rifles. The sound penetrated to them as if it were something infinitely remote, drumming dimly in ears which were already near to bursting from the pressure within.

The rifle slung across Hugh's back became an intolerable burden. He was sure that it would crush him and it seemed at times that he could not lift his arms because of it.

They came out finally on an overhanging shelf with a clear view of the blue sky above them. There were not fifty feet more to be scaled, and that stretch offered no difficulty. It was crumbling rock and gravelly chips which sloped steeply to the cliff top above it. At the summit of the treacherous rise were poised three huge

boulders, outlined starkly against the darkening blue that loomed immensely behind them.

Through the utter weariness which was fogging Hugh's mind a shaft of suspicion struggled to reach his consciousness. He regarded those boulders dully. Then he flung himself down for a moment's rest before they went on. Five minutes' respite would send the strength he needed coursing again through his young sinews. The others had done likewise.

Old Zachary had dropped into a sitting position, his shaggy head falling forward between his knees, his breath whistling from between his lips. He shook his broad shoulders as if angry that his great strength was failing him. Loe Tierney's lean frame had borne the heart-breaking strain of the climb with less show of exhaustion.

He was on his knees, peering coldly down into the fissure.

The sudden crunching of moving rock made him whirl, half rising on one foot. His scream, "Look out," burned on Hugh's brain, brought him leaping up in time to see Tierney dodge a flying chunk of rock as big as his head.

The initial crunching sound surged instantly into a grinding roar. Hugh's lurking suspicion flared too late into ghastly realization.

A single darting glance gave him a picture of the center boulder, toppled from its perch, crashing down upon them. Dislodged rocks flew in front of it, and an ugly mass of the splinters and eroded fragments moved sluggishly after it in its wake.

Horror-stricken, Hugh's eyes were riveted to the huge speeding rock.

He tried to rip his glance away to see what had become of his father and Tierney, but could not. The terrible fascination of that concentrated sum of destruction was too strong. He saw it strike a solid ledge. The ledge was shattered in a flurry of deadly splinters, but the boulder bounded into the air from the impact.

A FLYING rock catapulted into Hugh's shoulder, knocking him headlong. When he looked up the boulder had vanished as completely as if it had disintegrated in mid air. He could hear a mightly rumbling roar pouring up from the fissure and he knew that the boulder had leaped clear over the shelf on which they were imprisoned and was smashing down to the canyon floor. But the small avalanche which the boulder had started was tumbling out onto the shelf.

In that haze of terrifying impressions Hugh Bard got his first glimpse of his father.

Old Zachary was stretched on his belly a dozen feet away, his head and shoulders projecting over the lip of the shelf. He should have been able to crawl back to safety but that part of his body which was visible was bunched and knotted under the horrible agony of some tremendous strain.

Without being able to see it, Hugh knew that his father had sprung to help Loe Tierney when the latter had been knocked backwards. His hands had clamped on an ankle just as Tierney was on the verge of being plunged down to a ghastly death.

Hugh had taken two steps toward them when he heard the sharp crack of a pistol shot above the deep noise of the sliding rock.

Jerking at his own revolver, Hugh whipped a look at the cliff edge above them. Crouching there was a man, a man whose face looked strangely inhuman because of a smashed cheekbone. Hugh saw then that the rustlers had known that an ascent could be made through the fissure, and that Miles Payson had been placed there to prevent it.

Miles Payson. The man who had waited more than twenty years to wreak his ven-

geance against two others. He was right—that was the bitter part of it. His life, too, had been wrecked, and he was seeking a just payment for it. Payson was leveling his sixgun again.

At that moment Payson threw up his arms, twisting frantically to catch himself. Undermined by the slide, the lip of the cliff had given way under his feet, hurling him downward in a shower of dusty rock and debris.

He was enveloped by it, sucked under. Through it his flailing arms were visible, then as the slide halted, Hugh saw his half exposed body, lying there very still and limp.

There was a sharp moment after that, after Loe Tierney had been drawn back to the shelf by means of a lowered belt, when old Zachary, drained of his last ounce of strength, almost slipped over the edge himself. The avalanche had crawled to a shuddering, groaning halt within a few feet of them.

Hugh Bard and Loe Tierney carried Zachary between them up to the smooth cliff top and stretched him there on his back.

As the grim and bloody sun was dipping to touch the horizon, they went back, too, for Miles Payson. They dug him out, and carried him up, unconscious, beside Zachary.

Loe Tierney's lean face was harsh. The finger marks on his neck were ruddy and vividly apparent.

"Come on, kid," he said. "We come up here to do a job."

IN THE fading light the two men slipped along the rim of the cliffs. The fight which followed in that rude amphitheater hidden away in the depths of the Pinnacle Rocks country is still spoken of today to unbelieving listeners.

Scorched by a withering, inescapable fire from above, the ranks of the outlaws were thrown into panic. No quarter was expected, nor none given. When the sun had dropped wearily out of sight, the thing was done and Pinnacle Rocks would harbor no longer a dire menace to the ranges below it.

Hugh Bard walked slowly back, sickened in spite of himself, from that slaughter which had been so terrible but at the same time so inevitable. There had been no other course. As if from a great distance he heard Loe Tierney saying, "He didn't have to hold on. He could have dropped me and it would have been finished," and knew that he was thinking of the man who had once been his best friend.

Zachary Bard was barely conscious when they reached him again.

Miles Payson, breathing laboriously from a chest which was horribly crushed, motioned for Tierney to lean closer to him. Hugh saw his battered lips moving, heard very faintly his words:

"That statement that sent you up, Tierney—was forged. Better—tell you an' Bard before—I go under."

Then he died.

But Hugh Bard saw the gaunt, stern fighter who was Loe Tierney grip the hand of Zachary Bard. He saw the faded eyes of his father meet those of his old enemy. Perhaps in their memories, they were riding together, fighting for each other as they had started to do.

Hugh tried not to look at the tears in the older man's eyes as Tierney rose and faced him.

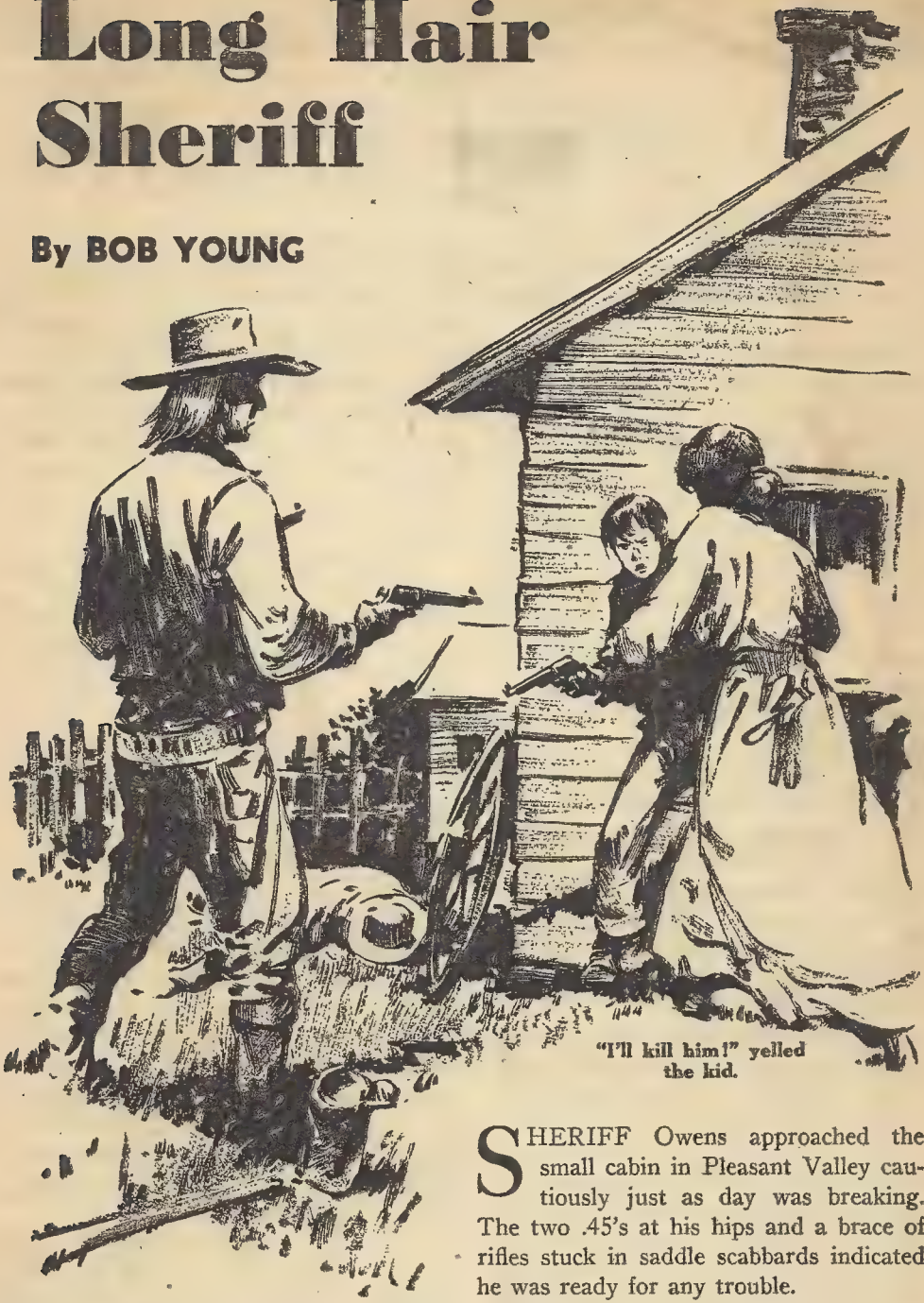
"I'll pay it back to him—and to you," he said simply.

Hugh Bard was staring past him, picturing what lay beyond the tortured barrenness of the Pinnacle Rocks—a range from which the blight had been removed, a feud that was broken, two old men, strong men, living on in friendship, unbreakable, and Kay Bard, his wife.

THE END

Long Hair Sheriff

By BOB YOUNG



"I'll kill him!" yelled the kid.

No hard-bitten hombre in the West could stop Commodore Perry Owens, the long-hair sheriff of Pleasant Valley. But a sixteen year old kid with a gun tried it. . . .

SHERIFF Owens approached the small cabin in Pleasant Valley cautiously just as day was breaking. The two .45's at his hips and a brace of rifles stuck in saddle scabbards indicated he was ready for any trouble.

"Owens, we warned you about any lawman coming into Pleasant Valley," Old Man Blevins called to him as he peeked from one of the windows.

"That may be all right for others, but

no one tells me where I ride, Blevins," Owens retorted.

He saw one of the Blevins' five boys snatch up a rifle. Without hesitation Owens fired from the hip. The boy staggered and fell. The father appeared in the door, firing as he sighted the sheriff. Owens, now dismounted, shot again, and saw his second target slump to the board floor.

As Owens slithered towards the house, he heard the rattle of hoofs towards the rear of the cabin and watched three of the brothers ride off into the sage. He knew there was still one boy left.

Kicking open the door, Owens stared through the smoke. He glimpsed the remaining foe. Owens fired again, and the clan war was over—for the time being.

Commodore Perry Owens hitched up his guns, and looked over the carnage he'd wrought. "Too bad," he muttered, "but it was their own fault."

The sheriff's full name may call to mind the Hero of Lake Erie, after which he was undoubtedly named, but he was no dry-land sailor. And another anomaly of this man was his shoulder-length blond hair. The hair which became a symbol to the Indians of a fighting, fearless, "Ghost-Man." To them he was bullet-proof, and sight of the long thatch sent them into terror.

Owens was exceedingly sensitive about both his name and hair; either was provocation for a fight. And though he was a quiet-mannered man, Owens never brooked an insult, dare, nor mistreatment of man or woman. In appearance he was tall and fair, with an acquiline nose, gray eyes, and blond hair to his shoulders.

Owens, even before he took over the job as sheriff of Holbrook, always went armed. He carried two rifles and two .45's slung from his hips.

Owens grew up with the Territory of Arizona, swinging in about the same time as the first stage line. He first dropped off at Navajo Springs, where he settled himself for a life of raising good horses. But he soon established his gun proficiency by killing a few horse rustlers, and was nominated for sheriff by the powerful Greer brothers soon afterwards.

WHEN Sheriff Owens had his fuss with the Blevins clan, it was his first participation in the bushwhacking that had marked the Hash-Knife and Pleasant Valley Wars, now growing in intensity. Of course, as sheriff he had kept on the fringes, jailing or shooting the men that broke the peace in his tough cowtown Holbrook. But generally speaking he was aloof from the dry-gulching feud.

In the course of trailing a horse thief, he had crossed through Pleasant Valley. Word was sent to him that Old Man Blevins didn't allow any lawman to cross the range. With that insult, and despite he had been riding all night, Owens wheeled his horse and started for the cabin to set the Blevins right. Which he did.

In the course of taming Holbrook, Owens had appointed Frank Wattrons Town Marshal and Justice of the Peace, who also ran the local drug store. Wattrons was the picture of the Western gambler. Tall, dark and good looking, he was always chewing a long black cigar, and was deadly serious. Like Owens he was completely without fear.

One time a drunken cowboy was telling his cronies at the "Bucket of Blood" what he was going to do with Wattrons when he saw him. As he swore and raged, he heard an ominous voice behind him:

"Drop your guns on the floor." Judge Wattrons was standing behind him with the double-barrelled shotgun he always carried for occasions like these. The Judge then began to curse the cowboy, telling him he was going to let loose with both barrels. The Judge had been threatened and was justified in so doing.

"Walk out into the street," the Judge ordered. "I don't want to spill any more blood on these floors." The Bucket of Blood was named in honor of two shot Mexicans who had done just that.

Judge Wattrons made the loud-mouthed "bad man" stand in a circle inscribed in the street dust. Then he continued to cuss him up and down without once repeating himself, winding up with:

"You yellow dog, get out of town."

As the cowboy mounted and left, the Judge broke open his shotgun and showed him the chambers—neither one was loaded.

Sheriff Owens was able to hold the gangs in check that came under his jurisdiction, but he let the range war alone. A fellow name of Burton Mossmon was riding herd on most of the rustlers. He was later captain in the Arizona Rangers.

Owens stood off an enraged mob who had planned a jail delivery to lynch a Mexican held for murder. He quietly told the mob of armed men, "There just aren't enough of you," and never budged an inch. The mob dispersed. He upheld the *law* without fear or favor.

IT WAS about this time eight Hashknife cowboys were hired by Tom Graham's clan to kill off the Tewksberry boys, feuding over posession and use of the Pleasant Valley.

The cowboys went to finish up the fight as hired, but when the smoke cleared, four of them were dead. The rest of the cowboys disappeared.

Graham's clan was not to be put off so easily, and the answer to their plans came in the person of Andy Cooper, who was actually one of the remaining Blevins boys.

Cooper, along with the Grahams, surrounded the Tewksberry cabin, and laid siege. John Tewksberry was the first to fall. His son-in-law was riddled as he tried to recover the body. A third Tewksberry was wounded, and lay there hurt.

Cooper shot at one of the women who tried to recover the body of her husband, but missed. He then turned to his men.

"There's only one thing left to do. Burn the house, and as they run out, we'll kill all of 'em." He looked at the men and could see the resistance to the plan. He added: "If we leave one of that clan, it might well mean the end for all of us," he stated for emphasis.

The words were prophetic. Sole survivor of the Grahams was ambushed by Ed Tewksberry, also the last survivor, in 1892 near Tempe.

The Grahams overruled Cooper on the arson plan. He tried to reason with them but they wouldn't accede. Said he:

"Okay, I'm leaving you to finish it with them. I don't want anything further to do with you," he snorted as he left. With him rode two brothers and a Texan named Roberts, headed straight fof Owens' bailiwick Holbrook. The sheriff held a warrant for Cooper and had sent word he wouldn't serve it, provided Cooper stayed out of reach—in Holbrook. In a murderous rage, Cooper ignored the warning, and challenged Owens to try and come get him.

The Commodore rode into town during the afternoon and was accosted with:

"You must be losing your touch, Sheriff. Cooper's here in town, and daring you to come after him."

"I'll go get him right now," he said grimly as he stepped up on his horse and rode off towards the Blevins' house.

Mrs. Blevins, since Sheriff Owens had shot her husband, had lived in a small wooden one-story house in the town. It was there Andy Cooper, along with his brothers and Roberts, took up his stand to meet the Long Hair Sheriff.

Commodore Owens rode up to the house, pulling his rifle from the scabbard, mounted the porch and knocked on the door. He was as matter-of-fact as if he

(Continued on page 130)

The Roaring

WEAVERVILLE, CALIFORNIA

WEAVERVILLE, CALIFORNIA, LOOKS TODAY VERY MUCH AS IT DID IN ITS BOISTEROUS PAST. THE ONLY THING MISSING IS THE CONSTANT ROAR OF SIXGUNS, BUT TODAY'S AUTOMOBILE HORNS MAKE UP FOR THAT. WEAVERVILLE HAS ALWAYS BEEN KNOWN FOR ITS HOSPITALITY. AS ONE MINER SAID IN 1857, "IF I'M GONNA DIE I WANT TO DO IT IN WEAVERVILLE. THEY KNOW HOW TO BURY A MAN ALL FITTIN' AND PROPER."

EVIDENTLY MANY MEN HAD THE SAME IDEA BECAUSE THE FRONTIER UNDERTAKER IN WEAVERVILLE HAD STEADY WORK. THE GUNMAN WHO MANAGED TO ESCAPE A BULLET WOULD USUALLY MEET UP WITH THE "INFANT" AND THE END RESULT WOULD BE THE SAME. THE INFANT WAS A 6'6" TEENAGER WHO WEIGHED 240 POUNDS AND COULD LICK A BULL. THE INFANT'S FAVORITE PASTIME WAS TO WADE INTO A GUN BATTLE UNARMED, TAP THE OFFENDER ON THE HEAD AND CARRY HIM OFF TO JAIL. SOMETIMES THE INFANT'S "SLIGHT" TAPS WOULD MAKE IT NECESSARY FOR HIM TO HEAD FOR THE MORTICIAN INSTEAD OF THE SHERIFF.

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Towns

By FREDERICK BLAKESLEE and JHAN ROBBINS

ALTHOUGH ONLY A DOZEN CHINESE REMAIN IN WEAVERVILLE TODAY, IN 1850 HALF OF THE TOWN'S POPULATION OF 3,000 WAS CHINESE. IN 1852, MEMBERS OF TWO RIVAL TONGS, ENCOURAGED BY AMUSEMENT-SEEKING WHITE MINERS, MET IN BATTLE. CHEERED ON BY THE MINERS, 300 AH YOU'S WERE BADLY ROUTED BY 500 YOUNG WO'S. SOON ONLY TWO WARRIORS REMAINED ON THE FIELD. THEY STOOD CALMLY STABBING EACH OTHER WITH THEIR CRUDE IRON FORKS UNTIL ONE FELL DEAD. THE OTHER MAN DIED AFTER TWO WEEKS OF SUFFERING. THE MINERS NEVER INSISTED ON A REPEAT PERFORMANCE.

ANOTHER OF WEAVERVILLE'S UNFORTUNATES WAS A COWPOKE NAMED SEYMOUR. HE WAS ACCUSED OF STEALING THE MONEY OF A VISITOR WHO HAD DRUNK TOO FREELY AND FALLEN ASLEEP IN A CONVENIENT PIGSTY. SEYMOUR WAS ABOUT TO SWING WHEN A LOCAL TOWNSMAN WAS RUSHED TO THE SCAFFOLD AND SHOUTED THAT HE HAD CUT A PIG OPEN THAT MORNING, AND FOUND THE MISSING MONEY INSIDE. SEYMOUR WAS RELEASED. FROM THAT DAY ON HE BECAME A VEGETARIAN. "PIGS ARE MAN'S BEST FRIEND," HE EXPLAINED.

Duke Hardee had everything a gunman could want—a lightning draw that had made him the most feared hombre in the West, and twice the required guts to back up that legend. The only thing he lacked was a place to hang his hat, and a friend to stand at his back in that last, desperate tight. . . .

Dan and Nate dove away from each other.

By

FRANK P. CASTLE

The Last Gun-Wolf

CHAPTER ONE

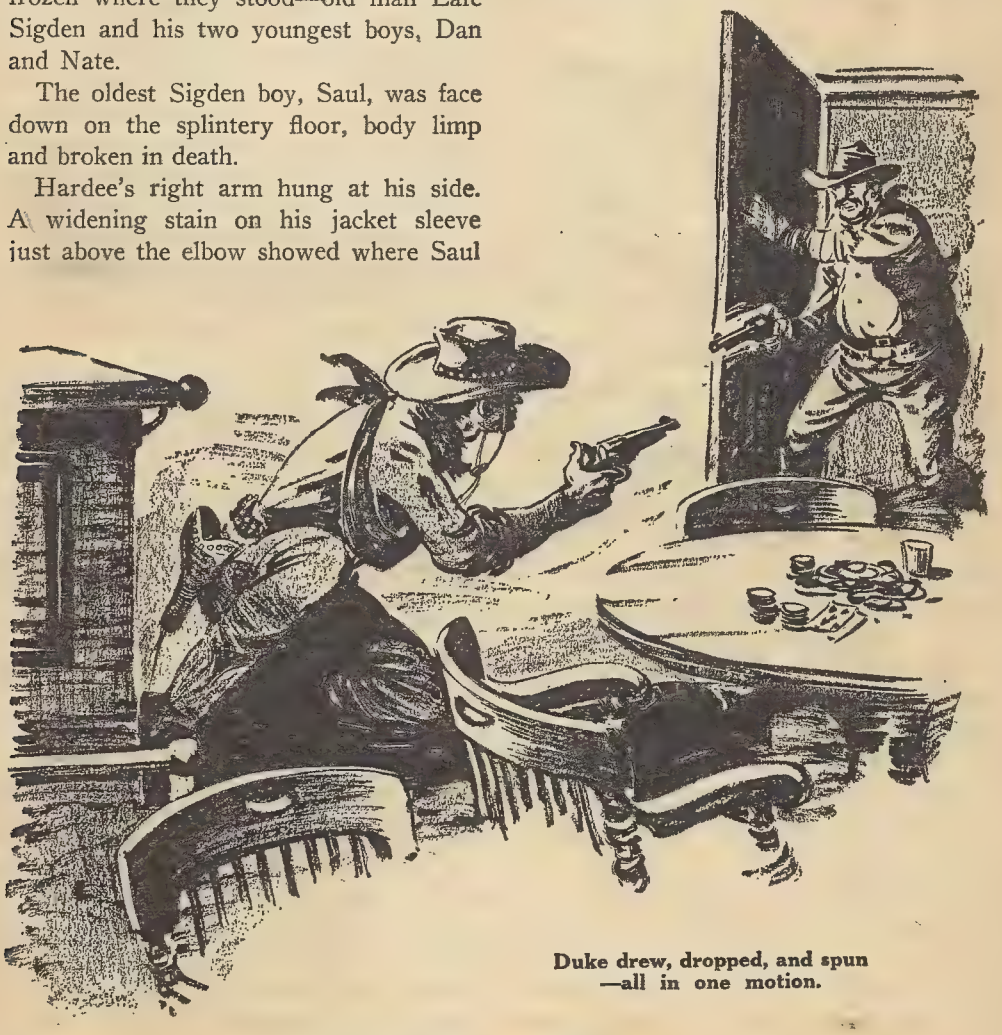
Man on the Dodge

THE ECHOES of the two blasting shots still whispered harshly in Hiller's Saloon at Frenchman's Fork on the Rapido, and powder-smoke hung in the pent, hot air before Duke Hardee. The three men at the bar were frozen where they stood—old man Lafe Sigden and his two youngest boys, Dan and Nate.

The oldest Sigden boy, Saul, was face down on the splintery floor, body limp and broken in death.

Hardee's right arm hung at his side. A widening stain on his jacket sleeve just above the elbow showed where Saul Sigden's one shot, coming a split instant after his own, had driven lead through flesh and sinew. The bone had been touched, too. The impact of the slug had driven him back against the front wall of Hiller's place with a crash, and he had automatically performed gun magic, even though shaken and hurt.

He had flipped up his heavy Colt, had



Duke drew, dropped, and spun —all in one motion.

A Hell-Roaring Novel of a Man on the Dodge

caught it out of the air with his left hand—a movement so incredibly swift and certain none of the Sigdens had dared move, even though their hate for him was as great as Saul's had been.

He was Duke Hardee, and he had a name whose potency exercised a fearful mesmerism. Hiller himself was standing like a ramrod, hands high, ostentatiously well away from his double-barreled scattergun under the bar, and Hiller hated him, too, now that he knew who he was. There was a miasma of hate here, something almost tangible. And there was sickness in Duke Hardee, as well as hate.

It was not the sickness of fear, this feeling which had his insides knotted and twisted in a frozen ball, which made him feel weak and unsteady, even though to those who watched he stood like a rock. Nor was it the sickness of pain, for there was no pain in him yet; his arm was still numb from shock.

This was what he felt, always, after a fight—never before. In the lightning seconds before the guns spoke, when he knew he would have to draw and use his Colt, he had no nerves, no thoughts. It was only afterwards that this sickness came. Then he knew what a perfectly functioning machine for murder he had become—and the hate he felt, as now, was for himself. Not for the man who had forced the fight resulting in his own death, and not for those surviving, whose desire to kill him burned in their eyes.

"I told him not to do it," he muttered, forcing the words past lips which felt like chips of granite. "You heard me. I wanted no fight. Lafe, leave me alone—you and your boys."

"Too late for that," the old man said huskily. He was angular and stubble-jawed, and all his sons were younger miniatures of himself. "It's always been too late, Hardee. Saul tagged you—good. Somewhere, sometime, we're going to finish the job for him."

"No," Hardee protested. "Saul and his Uncle Zack—they're enough. They both forced me, they're both dead. Let it end with them."

"When you're dead," Sigden droned. "Not before. Saul and Zack made mistakes. They faced you and tried to beat your draw. We'll get you another way, Hardee. We'll get you."

Dan and Nate Sigden shifted position a little, growling agreement. Hiller lowered his hands slightly. There was a shine in his eyes and his mouth twitched in crafty calculation. Hardee knew what he was thinking. If this talk went on and the Sigdens made some kind of move, there was a good possibility one of them might down him. Or he might be able to grab his scattergun and do it himself.

And if Duke Hardee met his end here, Hiller's saloon would be famous; it would do a land-office business. For a second, Duke thought how easy it would be to explode four more shells. Four would be enough. One for each of them. He could leave them all dead here—be rid of the Sigdens forever.

THEN he knew, wearily, that this would hurt rather than help. It would only add to the terrible nightmares through which he sweated as the faces of those he had killed came back to haunt him.

No, he'd have to do now what he always did—ride on, hunt new country where he wasn't known and where he could live quietly until the inevitable day when some newcomer recognized him and spread the word that he was Duke Hardee. Then it would all start again.

"I'm sorry about Saul," he said quietly. "Give him a decent funeral."

He backed through the batwings, out to the porch and from there to the walk. There wasn't much at Frenchman's Fork—a store, a blacksmith shop, a combined stage station, restaurant and hotel,

in addition to Hiller's—but it had been home for six months while he worked for the stage company, and he hated to leave.

He didn't dare even go up to his hotel room for his few belongings, now. He had to get gone, far and fast. Word would spread out beyond this settlement like a wave, and men would be riding in and looking for his trail—the kind ambitious to make names with their guns.

Though the pain was beginning, and his right arm hurt like hell, he forced himself to use it while untying his horse and lifting himself into saddle. Holding the gun steady in his left hand, he backed his mount twenty or thirty feet before beginning to turn it. Then a quiet word lifted it instantly into a run.

He holstered his gun, took the reins in his left hand and worked his right down under his belt so that his arm was rigid and tight against his side. Even so, it hurt. It needed a doctor. And he couldn't pause to look for the whiskey-soaked sawbones who practiced desultorily here.

He splashed across the Rapido and turned up the trail on its north bank. As always, this horse of his was a good animal—a big, superbly muscled claybank, perfectly trained and gentled. It stretched out into a long run again.

Duke looked ahead to the dark loom of the Trentino Peaks, set like a wall along the northern horizon. He could make it through Pacheco Pass before night. The land beyond was high and empty, thinly settled. It was the kind of country he liked. Maybe he could find a place there to stop for a while, before he had to start running again.

He was always running. He always had been, since the discovery of his strange fate—that he was a man apart among men, a natural killer.

IT WAS black night before Hardee stopped, in timber beyond Pacheco Pass, beside a brawling mountain stream. He made a dark, cold camp, picketing his horse where it could find graze, scraping pine needles for a thin mattress, setting the animal's saddle for his pillow and its blanket for his bed.

Then, with teeth gritted, he got out of his jacket and shirt, slashed off the torn undershirt sleeve and lay down beside the creek to bury his arm in icy water.

This hurt almost beyond endurance at first, then numbness came back to his arm and the pain was deadened. He lay still for quite a while. Sleep was a thing to be postponed as long as possible. But at last he rose again, wrapped himself in the blanket and stretched out, hopeful the high-country chill and his hurt arm would keep him awake.

They didn't. He drifted into his usual light, uneasy doze presently, and the nightmare began. It was the same as always. He was on a vast, gray plain under a burning sun, riding an enormous horse.

And suddenly ahead of him, in single file, appeared the gaunt figures of men, walking toward him. Men whose faces became recognizable as they approached—the faces of those he had killed. The face of Saul Sigden was among them. Men who held bony arms out to him as their lips moved soundlessly in supplication, begging to live again. The giant horse, which a moment ago had been moving as swiftly as the wind, now was not moving at all. He spurred it desperately, without avail. And the gaunt figures closed in.

Hardee started awake. He must have rolled on his arm; the pain in it was savage. But he was grateful. There was the usual drenching sweat on his body, in spite of the biting cold of easy dawn. He rose stiffly, saddled his horse, and rode on. He had been in saddle for hours, still without breakfast, before the sun cleared the peaks.

The arm told him he couldn't go on much longer like this. Hardee thought briefly of the choices open to him. A

sizable cattle outfit had moved into Big Blue basin, but its owner was a meager-bodied, cold-eyed man from Missouri who had no use for Texans.

Anyway, it was too far to the basin for him to make it in a day's ride. This left only Judson's place down on the Blue itself. Duke didn't care much more for Ben Judson than he did for the cattleman, but by pushing hard he could make it to the settlement at the river crossing before dark.

At noon he stopped to rest and graze the claybank, and looked at his arm. The flesh about the bullet hole was an angry purple color. The pain had settled to a steady pounding throb. The arm itself hung like a dead thing. He could not close his fingers.

Riding on, he began to feel his long hours in the saddle without food. This was because of his arm, Hardee thought. He had done more than this, many times, without ill effects. But now giddiness came in recurring waves to make him light-headed.

He knew he had to stay in the saddle until he reached his destination. If he dismounted, he might not be able to climb leather again.

THE SUN was almost down before he saw the broad, placid sweep of the Blue, with Judson's clutter of buildings on its far side. The claybank splashed wearily through the ford and plodded up to the hitch rack. Judson himself came out to the porch of his place—a sort of trading post, with rough eating and sleeping facilities for those willing to pay well for them.

He moved slowly down the steps to the yard. He was a big, moon-faced man, with a constant easy smile which was belied by the sharpness of his little eyes. His oldest son, the one with no Indian blood in him, a surly fellow, stood just beyond. Judson nodded.

"You're a long way from your stamping grounds, boy," the trader said softly. "Thought you had got to be a permanent fixture down on the Fork."

"I pulled out," Duke answered. "Would like to stay here a while, Judson."

The big man's sharp eyes appraised him, noting the stiff arm thrust into Hardee's belt, the lack of gear a man would carry when he left one place for another, the spraddle-legged weariness of the claybank.

"Sure," Judson said. "Anybody can stay here, any time—for a price. You got hard money to show me?"

"Later," Duke said. "You'll get it, Judson."

"Now," the trader said. "Or you don't stay. Of course, we could make a trade, maybe—your horse and saddle gear. They ought to be worth grub and a bed for a couple of nights."

Hardee's head felt like an apple on a string, being swung by somebody in ever-widening circles. He gripped his saddle-horn hard, trying to reply. He was vaguely aware of a door slamming, and of someone coming out on the porch—of the flutter of skirts and an angry feminine voice.

"Judson, don't just stand there! This man is hurt."

Hardee dismounted, still trying to cling to the horn, but the giddiness hit him hard. He stumbled and went down. He was aware briefly of softness against his cheek and of a warm fragrance which was pleasant. Then he heard a deep friendly voice and saw a bearded man bending down as he started to rise again. A strong arm helped him up and inside as Judson stepped aside, scowling.

CHAPTER TWO

Faster Than the Fastest

SITTING in warm sunshine outside of Judson's place, Duke grinned as Emma Crail tried hard, tongue absorbedly

in a corner of her mouth, to roll him a cigarette. His arm was in the sling she had made for him. It felt stiff but didn't hurt much.

Ten days or two weeks, he thought, and he'd be all right again. Of course, there was some danger in not having the use of the arm for that long, but it seemed remote when he was with this girl.

She looked at the misshapen paper cylinder ruefully.

"Tex, it just never seems to come out right!"

"Looks fine," he said, taking it from her fingers. Tex was the name he had been using in this country—Tex Harris. He scratched a match, looking down the dusty road to the ford. Emma's father, Hugh Crail, was riding up it. He was the bearded man who had carried Duke's weight against his shoulder as he stumbled inside, that first night here. And Emma was the girl who had been angry with Judson when the trader had tried to bargain Duke out of his horse and saddle.

He couldn't recall anybody who had ever treated him as these two had. Who he might be hadn't bothered them at all. He had been in trouble, hurt, and sick. It had apparently been enough for their kind.

"You look right pert today, boy," Crail said, smiling. "I got a notion maybe you'll get well."

Duke nodded soberly. "Thanks to you two," he said. "How's everything with your outfit this afternoon, Mr. Crail?"

"I'm going to see now," the bearded man answered. "Just got back from a ride down the south bank of the Blue. It's mighty pretty country, Tex. If the basin you told me about is like it, I expect we'll find that's just what we've been looking for as a place to put down our roots."

"The basin is better," Hardee told him. "All open country, and still empty. There's a cow outfit off to the west, but the fellow there is using fifty thousand acres when he only needs ten, and there's still plenty of room. You'll find all the graze you need, and water the year around. I doubt if there's unfilled country anywhere that's half as good."

"I'm sold," Crail chuckled. "I'll have my boys move the herd across the river right away and on down to south bank grass. Emma, honey, by another week we'll be settled where our new home is going to be."

The girl exclaimed in delight, and Duke felt pleased he had been of some help. It was small return for what they had done for him. At the same time, he felt a twinge because they would be leaving. He hadn't been as happy in years, just enjoying their company.

It was going to be particularly hard to say good-bye to Emma. Even while talking to her father, his attention had been on the girl. She was small and slender, with pleasant features, a dusting of freckles across the bridge of her nose, and a demureness in dress which he liked.

He wouldn't forget how she had worked on his wound, shaken by its ugliness but sticking until it was cleaned and bandaged. She had badgered Judson into giving him a room with a fairly clean bed. Duke had gathered that Hugh Crail was a stockman, near the end of a trail drive, and had paused here to scout ahead and to give the girl a chance to rest and freshen up before going on.

NEXT morning, he had been surprised to see Doc Murtry. The Frenchman's Fork sawbones had gone to treat the basin cattleman for carbuncles, and had swung over here to set a broken arm for one of Judson's half-Ute kids. Murtry, a quiet, mild little man who was still a conscientious medico when sober, had re-dressed the wound, showing no curiosity as to how Duke had received his hurt.

"You had a mighty close call, boy," he

had warned. "That slug took part of your shirt and jacket into the hole it made. You escaped blood poisoning by a hair. I've seen men lose arms that didn't look much worse than yours. Now, you've got to carry it as easy as you can. No riding, nothing to jolt it, and wear a sling until the hole has completely healed and the new flesh isn't tender to your touch."

Duke thought of this, watching Crail go on down the road, turn to the right and pass around Hudson's barn, heading north. His arm felt fine today and he was tired of sitting here, always with the feeling Judson was watching him covertly, turning some thought about him over and over behind his bland, smiling mask of a face. The trader hadn't said anything more about pay, but Duke knew he must be thinking of it pretty constantly.

He looked at Emma Crail and said, "I'd like to walk out and take a look at your father's outfit."

"Tex, I don't know—" she protested, frowning.

He grinned. It pleased him to have her worry about him, like a mother hen with one chick. He took her arm and started after Crail. Emma caught up her skirt to keep it out of the dust, and his grin widened. She didn't mind walking with him. She had protested because of concern for his arm.

A long while back, beaver had dammed a small creek running into the Blue. For a time there had been a lake, and then it had silted up, and where it had stood was now a meadow deep in the richest kind of graze. A stand of aspen and cottonwood still marked the course of the creek, and beyond it Duke saw Crail's herd. Three hundred head, he estimated—all horses.

He pulled up, watching with pleasure. This was the finest batch of horseflesh, for such a sizable herd, he had ever seen. From scraps of overheard talk and things Emma had said, he knew the Crails were from Nebraska, that they had sold a big piece of grass there, invested everything in these horses and then moved south and west with them, looking for new country where they could build for a long future, raising such animals as these.

Duke saw a handsome Morgan stallion and a slim-legged bay which bore unmistakable evidence of thoroughbred blood. He sucked in his breath unsteadily.

"You love horses, too, Tex," Emma said happily.

"More than anything else."

Hugh Crail came riding back to where they stood, showing no surprise at their presence here.

"Honey," he said to the girl, dismounting, "Old Bill is rummaging around in your wagon. I told him you'd pull out his beard, whisker by whisker, for that. Maybe you better go and really drive him away, though."

EMMA made a small sound of indignation, rushing off. Crail smiled at Hardee.

"I can see your opinion of my horses shining all over your face, boy," he said. "Does me good. I did well enough with cattle, but I never could warm up to steers the way I can to what I've got here. Might not make as much money, but I figure to do all right at horse ranching, after a couple of years getting started and building this herd. What you figure to do with yourself when you're well?"

The abruptness of this question startled Duke.

"Why," he answered, "I just got the notion maybe you can use another hand, Mr. Crail. I'd be willing to work cheap, while you're getting started, and I think I could give good service. I almost talk horse language."

Crail suddenly looked sad and troubled.

"Figured you might say that," he told Hardee quietly. "It's why I sent Emma away, so we could have a private talk. I

like you, boy. Emma likes you—maybe too much for what's liable to happen if I give a job to Tex Harris. Because some day he's got to go back to being Duke Hardee again."

Duke bit his lip. "How did you find out?" He asked.

"That first night, I sat by your bed a while after you went to sleep, and you had a nightmare and did some talking. Maybe Judson heard you, too. If I was you, I'd guard myself. I told him if there was any question of pay I'd guarantee your bill, but there's mean blood in the man. He might try something while you're crippled."

Crail studied him thoughtfully and shook his head. "I've heard a lot about Duke Hardee. Suppose everybody has. The fastest gun of them all. And I sure never thought he'd look and act like you. Mind telling me, now, how you happened to get shot?"

"No," Duke said. "I don't mind telling you everything."

And so he did, standing there beside the quiet, bearded man while Emma was away. About a boy raised down in the Nueces country, cradle of fighting men, though there had been nothing about him to indicate he was to be the most famous of that kind.

Like his father before him he had been a quiet sort, with a love which amounted almost to passion for good horseflesh. But both the country and the times demanded a man who could at least defend himself, and Duke Charles Hardee, Atascosa County rancher, had worked to give his son a fair training in gun-handling.

What had happened then was something fantastic and unbelievable. For he had needed no training. He was, from the first, faster than the fastest and, with only a little practice, deadly accurate up to ultimate range with either handgun or rifle.

It was something Duke hadn't understood or liked. He didn't understand it yet, though an El Paso doctor had told him there might be some short cut between his brain and his muscular reflexes which made his hand so lightning fast—and, after only a brief examination, he had pronounced Duke Hardees's eyes the keenest he had ever seen. Together, perhaps, they made him what he was.

THIS was something he hadn't asked for and didn't want, but he couldn't help it any more than he could his sandy hair. And he was to discover early that it was a fatal gift. When he was only seventeen, as a matter of fact, in front of Jourdanton courthouse.

That had been Zack Sigden, the first to go down before his gun, one of a raffish, thieving clan whose remaining members were no longer down on the Atascosa, but had recently drifted out to Frenchman's Fork.

"Saul Sigden was the tenth I had to down," he told Hugh Crail. "From talk, you'd think there had been a hundred, but I remember every one and I know. I should. I see them in my sleep, damned near every night."

"Sounds like these Sigdens have a blood feud against you," the bearded stockman said.

"I guess. It started with an argument over a Hardee steer that Lafe Sigden—Saul's father—butchered for table beef. Dad warned him off our land. He was a great man, my father. English, though he lived in Texas forty years, clear from the days of the republic. The oldest son in the family is always named Duke Charles. I was never called Duke at home, and it's a name I've come to hate in the last few years.

"Anyway, Dad died of the fever that spring I was seventeen, and he hadn't been in his grave a week when the Sigdens started talking about shoving what

they called his lie about that steer down my throat. I tried to keep out of a fight, but Zack braced me in the courthouse square one Saturday morning. They buried him that afternoon, and I was already riding west, trying to get away from the need of having to use my gun again."

"You built yourself a fearsome kind of name after that," Crail said slowly.

"Yes," Duke agreed bitterly. "Without ever trying. I never have hired my guns to anybody. I've always worked around horses. A man in El Paso was out of the Nueces country and had heard of my trouble with Zack. He baited me into a fight. I went to Deming, and a gunswift there had heard about the fellow in El Paso. In Tucson, another one had heard about both the one in El Paso and the one in Deming. That's the way it has been. Always somebody trying to knock me over for the name tagged on me. Six years of it now. I don't guess it'll end until I do."

Crail nodded in agreement. "I'm afraid not, boy. And you see what I mean about you coming along with me and Emma? Some day, a hardcase would ride in looking for you, and you'd either have to kill him and run again, or get killed, which would be as bad or worse."

"Yes. You're right. I'll walk back by myself, now. You tell Emma I got sort of tired. And move on right away, so I won't have to say good-bye."

"I'll do that," Crail said. "I never had a harder chore than talking to you like I had to, and I never wished anybody luck, son, more than I'm wishing it for you."

Duke nodded, turning away. He really was tired now. The grim thought was in him that it might have been better if Saul Sigden had placed his shot more accurately, so he wouldn't have to live with the painful necessity of not seeing Emma Crail again.

CHAPTER THREE

The Eleventh Man

FROM the porch of Judson's place, later in the afternoon, Duke saw Crail's herd push down to the Blue and splash across it. Emma was out in front, driving a small, high-wheeled spring wagon. He stayed well back in the shade, and she did not see him.

From the set of her small chin, her father must have told her something that made her not care.

And it was best to leave it that way, Duke told himself.

It worried him some that so few riders sided Hugh Crail—and one of them a white-bearded old man. Duke shook this thought off. Crail had brought these horses all the way from Nebraska. It seemed likely he could take care of himself and what belonged to him.

Restless and lonely with Emma and her father gone, Duke wandered down to the barn for a look at his claybank. It seemed to be receiving the usual indifferent attention Judson gave his own stock. Duke had moved his gun from right side to left side, his first morning here, and now he tried a few snap draws.

If there was some short cut between brain and muscles, it must be confined to his right hand only, he thought. He was reasonably fast on a left-hand draw, but it was not speed comparable to what he could achieve with his right. Duke frowned, flexing his hurt arm tentatively. Not too much pain. Still, it held enough to warn him that he shouldn't disregard Doc Murtry's advice.

Going back to the house, he ate supper alone, silently served by the trade's Ute woman. Judson himself apparently was absent on some errand and, with Crail and the girl gone, Duke was the only occupant of his upstairs rooms.

The evening seemed to stretch out, after

sunset, interminably. He sat on the porch for a while, trying to roll a cigarette one-handed and wasting a lot of tobacco without success. Darkness came down, lamps were snuffed behind him and there was silence inside. Judson's continuing absence made Duke uneasy.

He went up to his room, but distaste for sleep brought him down again after a couple of hours.

He went for a quiet prowl along the river, wondering how far the Crails had gone and thinking of the girl asleep in the small tent which she had told him her wagon carried.

Duke was near the ford when he heard horsemen ride up and stop on the south bank. By the stars, it was midnight or a little later. Listening to a mutter of talk, he tried to count them. Five riders, he thought—maybe six. He saw them split up, some going down the south bank while a pair rode into the ford, crossing it slowly and making little noise.

They paced quietly on up to the store and dismounted. Duke silently followed them. He saw the two go inside, easing the door open with care. Their stealth puzzled him. Then, several minutes later, he saw a light flare against a window and grunted. The light was in the room which he had been occupying.

THEY came outside again and moved hurriedly to the barn. Duke saw them enter it with the same guarded care. He circled the barn and slipped inside through the rear door. Down toward the front he saw Judson, holding a lantern and standing in front of the stall which held his claybank. The other man stood beyond Judson. Duke couldn't see him very clearly.

"He wouldn't do much moving around," Judson said fretfully. "Not with that arm. And he didn't go with the Crails, because here's his horse. I wish to hell I knew where he was."

"You better do more than wish, Judson," the other man growled, and the short hairs lifted at the back of Hardee's neck as he recognized the rasping voice of Lafe Sigden. "Me and my boys rode a long piece up here on the say-so of that son of yours. You sent down word about a big horse herd that could be grabbed without too much trouble, and you also said that devil, Hardee, was sitting here at your place with his gun-arm crippled. Now the horses are gone, Hardee's missing, and my boys are riding down the river into God knows what."

"I tell you, Hardee can't be far away," Judson protested. "The Doc warned him that if he put much strain on that arm, moving around, he'd be in danger of losing it. And my woman told me Crail moved his herd just after I rode out to meet you, so he can't have gone far, either. We'll find Hardee, finish up here and join my boy and your sons in time for a fast strike just before moonset. That'll hammer Crail's outfit into the dust."

"It better work the way you talk it," Sigden snapped. "We can shove those horses on south and then over into Arizona, where each of us ought to pocket a nice piece of cash—the market for saddle stock is said to be good there right now. But that isn't the most important thing to me, this minute. Seeing Hardee dead at last is. I want that dog laid out at my feet. Get busy finding him, Judson."

"Sure," the trader agreed placatingly. "I'll wake up my woman and kids and start them looking. I'll turn my whole place inside out."

"No need for that," Duke said gently. "Just turn your head and keep on talking, Judson. I want to hear more about this scheme to grab Crail's horses."

It was the first time in his life he had known and welcomed the certainty that he was going to use his gun. It was the first time he was glad that he was skilled in its use.

Judson stiffened and faced jerkily toward him. Sigden was masked by the trader's burly body. Judson dropped the lantern and clawed hastily at the weapon hanging at his side. Duke's Colt came out of its holster and into his left hand in a smooth, easy draw.

Powderflame streaked from the shadows where Sigden stood, and lead hummed close to Hardee's face. He slammed a shot down the barn and saw Judson jerk again, and break, and pitch forward on his face, without pulling the trigger of his drawn weapon.

Sigden was running toward the barn door, a long, zigzagging shadow. Duke tried for him with a questing bullet and missed. He heard the man race across the yard, and then the hurried hoofbeats of his horse as he heeled it into a run, heading for the ford and the darkness beyond.

Hardee shook his head slowly. Given a right-hand draw, he would have dropped Sigden also before the man could take a step.

Moving forward and thinking soberly of this, he looked down at Judson's body. Number eleven on the list of those he had hurled to death. And this was the first time he had not felt the wrenching sickness and bitter reaction afterwards.

His thoughts moved swiftly. Sigden and his boys, with Hudson's oldest son, had a plan set up to hit Crail's outfit and steal his horses. Duke knew he would have to move very fast if he was to head them off. And there was only one way he could try it and hope to succeed—doctor's advice or not.

Hardee pulled his right arm out of the sling and flexed his fingers experimentally. This brought pain, but he ignored it. He could use the hand. Tossing the sling aside, he swiftly saddled the claybank. As he put boot-toe into stirrup, Judson's Ute woman came into the barn. She walked slowly to the huddled form of the man Hardee had downed, and looked at it with the stoicism of her race in her impassive features.

"I'm sorry," Duke said to her.

She looked up at him and slowly shook her head. He suddenly realized that a man who had been calculatingly mean in his dealings with others must have acted the same way toward his own family. The Ute woman was not sorry. Touching the brim of his hat to her, Hardee wheeled his horse and rode out of the barn.

CHAPTER FOUR

Exit the Duke

THE CLAYBANK splashed through the ford and Hardee turned him south, spurring the animal hard. It was fairly open country, with creek timber off to his right and the dying moon faintly lighting the path Crail's horse herd had left.

Stoically he endured the steady, protesting hurt in his injured arm. Duke favored it as much as possible, reining with his left. However, he constantly worked the fingers that had to be flexible, swift and sure when the need came.

He had covered perhaps five miles and the moon was down, when guns began talking in ragged, explosive bursts of sound up ahead, with flashes of powderflame that were like the winkings of distant heat lightning. Duke's throat tightened and he pushed the claybank harder. Moments after the first shot, he heard the sharply defined clatter of many shod hoofs in rapid motion.

The raiders had hit Crail's horses and had them running.

From the sound, they were being pushed away from the creek in a southeasterly direction. Toward Pacheco Pass, Duke thought, and swerved the claybank to cut the track the raiders had set. Guns were popping again, down by the river,

but they died behind him in a last stuttering burst. Something was burning there, also, lifting a finger of flame high into the sky.

Low, deeply eroded sandstone hills fanned away from the Blue toward the east, and Hardee drove the claybank into these at a breakneck pace. Surmounting the first wave of hills he saw, etched against the lighter blackness of the eastern sky, what seemed to be a dark river spilling swiftly over a farther crest.

Hardee cursed thinly. It was Crail's herd, strung out now and being pushed fast. Too fast for him to hope for any success in heading and turning them.

Besides, that fire behind worried him. He was concerned about Emma Crail and her father—especially Emma. Since he knew where the raiders were heading, time taken now to ease his anxiety wouldn't be wasted. He turned the claybank and started back.

One rider must have been left behind to discourage pursuit, Duke thought. He heard the horseman coming in fast from the west. But, first to be sure, he yelled a challenge. The other was closer than he had thought, and yelled back in surprise and defiance, coming down one of the sandhill slopes and directly at him. And a gun blasted from very near, in a gambling shot which narrowly missed.

Duke drew and fired in such swift response that the two hammering shots seemed only one, automatically aiming a little above the other's muzzle-flame on the supposition his gun was braced against a hip for steadiness. Then he swerved the claybank, but too late. The other rider's horse crashed into his mount in a grazing collision.

He was unseated and thrown hard into the brush.

It was the kind of fall he could ordinarily have taken rolling, to come up with no more than scratches and perhaps a few bruises. But this time his hurt arm was badly twisted and jolted as the full weight of his body came down on it. Staggering to his feet again, the fingers of his left hand clamped tightly on muscles where hot pain throbbed, he started a swift hunt for another who, like himself, was down in the brush. At the moment of impact he had seen that the horse which had plowed into him was riderless.

It was a hunt which did not take long. He found a sprawled, motionless form, approached it cautiously and scratched a match. The sightless eyes of Judson's son made him quickly blow the match out again.

NUMBER twelve, Duke thought woodenly. The tally was mounting. And it seemed likely to go even higher soon.

He called the claybank, and it came to him. Getting into saddle again was a chore which brought sweat to his forehead and ground his teeth roughly together. Doc Murtry had known what he was talking about when he had warned against jolting this arm. It was hurting already as it had that first night beside the high mountain creek.

It was a hurt so strong that nothing was to be gained now by favoring it. Hardee handled the reins with both hands, riding fast on down to Crail's camp. The fire had burned itself almost out, but its still flickering glow led him in.

He saw it was Emma's spring wagon which had been burned. The score against the Sigdens was already as high as it could go, but this act of wanton destruction seemed to add a little extra urgency to the need for its settlement.

Several men were moving aimlessly about. Emma was sitting on a grassy bank beyond her burned wagon, with her father's head in her lap. He was unconscious.

The girl, staring straight before her, seemed dazed.

Duke picked up a blanket which had been kicked aside in a bed circle about the cookfire and wrapped it gently around the girl.

"They killed old Bill," she said, in a husked, dry whisper. "One of them rode straight at me, and Bill got between us. Now he's dead."

Duke knelt to examine Crail. The man's riders had knotted together when he had ridden up. Now one of them stepped forward, frowning suspiciously. Duke nodded, recognizing him from casual meetings at Judson's place. He groped for and remembered the fellow's name.

"Hello, Fitch. I came as quick as I could—managed to hand one of them a lead ticket back in the hills. They get anybody beside Bill?"

"Yes," Fitch said, relaxing a little. "Young Pete Skinner, the kid of our outfit. And a couple of us were nicked. Then there's the boss. They burned plenty of powder, trying to make sure of getting him."

"Only one hit on him, and that a skull crease," Duke said, rising again. "He'll be all right." He turned to Fitch. "They get all the horses, or did you have any pegged out?"

"I guess enough riding stock was saved to mount all of us. But I don't think that will help much. Hugh Crail has been a good boss and we're willing to do all we can, but we didn't hire on as fighting hands and we haven't got the savvy to do much against the kind that raided us."

"I haven't got in mind that you should try," Duke told him. "The herd is being driven toward Pacheco Pass. Once through the Pass, they'll have to go on to Frenchman's Fork on the Rapido. If I've got this thing figured right I think they'll stop there a while—maybe only a couple of hours, but I'm hoping it'll be longer. Then they'll shove those horses on toward Arizona. I'm going down to the Fork and try to stop them there. You push along behind me as fast as you can."

FITCH blinked at him in disbelief.

"I've got admiration for guts, boy, but not damned foolishness," he growled. "You're talking about a deliberate tangle with too many fast-gun hardcases for one man to handle. If we push along behind, we'll get there just in time to bury you."

"Maybe," Duke conceded. "But I can't see any other way to handle it. If I wait on you, we're all liable to reach the Fork too late."

Emma Crail spoke suddenly, eyes clear and rational again.

"Tex, your arm!" she cried. "You've taken it out of the sling, and you've been doing some riding. Fitch, don't let him get in a saddle again."

Duke stared at her. Hugh Crail hadn't told the girl about him yet. To Emma, he was still Tex Harris, a drifter with a bullet-endangered right arm.

"You don't understand," he told her gently. "All those horses are gone—everything you and your father own. Somebody has got to go out and get them back."

"You, alone—with that crippled arm?" Emma said unevenly. "Even if you didn't want to see me again, as dad said—even if you thought me only a foolish girl who talked too much—I won't let you do it. The horses aren't worth your arm. Nothing is. When morning comes, and dad is conscious again, we Crails will decide what's to be done."

Fitch nodded agreement with the girl's words.

"You heed her, boy," he said gruffly. "I've heard talk about your arm, and the way you're holding it shows it must be hurting like hell. Just take it easy, now."

The paling eastern sky told Hardee he had already waited almost too long. He

wished that Emma Crail's father had told her the truth about him, or that Hugh Crail was conscious to do the talking for him now. But Crail, face waxy, showed no sign yet of reviving. Duke flexed the fingers of his right hand again, stepping back so that all those here were in front of him.

"I've got a name that hasn't been known by anyone—except Crail—in this bunch yet," he advised quietly. "It's Duke Hardee. Stand still."

The warning was unnecessary. Fitch sucked in his breath sharply. He was immobile, as were the rest of Crail's riders. Duke reached for the claybank's reins and lifted himself into saddle.

Not until then did he glance a last time at Emma. Rigid and silent, her face frozen, she stared at him. Only the girl's eyes seemed alive, and Duke knew they were begging him to deny what he had just said.

He turned the claybank and rode away fast.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Last Draw

THE SUN was down but the day's heat was still oppressive when Hardee entered Frenchman's Fork. The claybank quivered under him. It had taken more of a beating than he cared to give any horse.

Moving at a walk along the quiet street, he turned in at the stage station barn and tossed his mount's reins over to a hostler.

"Give him a good rubdown and a light measure of oats, Harry," he directed.

The hostler fingered a bristly chin, staring in a way which told Duke that the news of his identity had been spread here.

"Sure," he muttered. "And they're waiting for you down at Hiller's. You better take the back way if you plan to go calling."

Frowning, Duke watched him lead the claybank away. He began flexing the fingers of his right hand again. Doc Murtry must have been wrong. The pain in his arm had ceased during the night, and now it didn't bother him at all. But the muscles in it were becoming strangely wooden and stiff.

The tracks left by Crail's stolen horses were plain in the street. They had been pushed on through town, and he had a notion they were being held somewhere close beyond. It had been his feeling from the first that there would be a pause here at the Fork. The Sigdens weren't the kind not to pause at any convenient saloon after so much riding and so much more to come.

Now, according to the hostler, they knew he was here. This wasn't surprising. Lafe Sigden had seen him in Judson's barn, and he hadn't made any attempt to hide himself, coming down from the Blue. He must have been plainly skylined for them at times—a single rider, moving fast. They were waiting for him at Hiller's, waiting to end the long enmity which had begun down on the Nueces, and to dispose of the single threat to the successful completion of their contemplated steal.

DUKE had hoped, with his openness, for something like this, but he hadn't anticipated it would be set up so nicely for him. They were being maybe just a little too obliging. He thought of this as he went out through the barn at the back and across the corral, ducking between its rails.

As he straightened again, he saw Doc Murtry swing around the hotel's corner and walk hurriedly toward him.

"Thought I saw you ride in," the doctor said sharply. "Weren't you listening when I told you to stay off a horse

and wear a sling? This is bad, son!"

"The arm's all right," Duke growled, starting across a muddy lane toward the rear of Hiller's place. "It hurt some when I first took off the sling, but now there's no pain at all."

"I want to see it, then," Murtry interrupted, suddenly grave and worried. "In my office, right now."

"Later, Doc," Duke said. "After I finish the chore I came here to do. Then you can poke and pry all you please."

"Son," the doctor said,. "you wait as much as an extra minute, and you might as well lay that arm on a chopping block and invite somebody to swing an axe at it."

Duke's stride slowed momentarily. Then he went on. Murtry's meaning was clear, and it was a temptation to stop and go with him. The lack of feeling in his arm was ominous now. Fear of its meaning set a pulse hammering in his throat. But memory of Hugh and Emma Crail—the only ones who had shown him kindness since his unwanted reputation as a killer had been hung on him—kept him moving forward.

Back of Hiller's place there was a storage shed. Duke gently tested the saloon's rear door. It was not latched. He frowned at the storage shed and hesitated a moment, then slid sideways through the door and inside.

The long narrow barroom was before him. Dan and Nate Sigden stood at the bar and Hiller behind it, the saloon owner going rigid at sight of Duke and lifting both hands ostentatiously above the counter. Maybe just a little too ostentatiously.

Lafe Sigden, the father, wasn't here. There was a pattern, then, a trap. A message must have been passed, together with some cash, probably, to the hostler and others at other places he might go, designed to toll him in through that rear door, with the storage shed so handy as a hiding place for old Lafe. When the time came, he would move in and catch Duke Hardee with his back turned.

"Stand right still, everybody," Duke ordered quietly. "Hiller, I figured you were pulling the strings on this. You must have hired some of your saloon bums to hold those horses so the Sigdens could wait here for me."

What was planned for him had to come quickly, and he was only talking, killing the few necessary seconds before the trap closed. He didn't need the exultant shine in Hiller's eyes to confirm his guess. And the rest of it was patent enough.

He heard the slight squeak of the rear door opening and an exultant grunt from Lafe Sigden and his hurried footfalls as he came in. Duke drew and dropped to one knee and spun toward him, all in one smooth motion.

He did not go all the way around, but was turned quarteringly to thin the target he offered for the old man's gun. Thus, he saw Dan and Nate dive away from each other, clawing at their weapons, while Hiller bobbed down out of sight behind his bar.

Lafe's gun was already out. He fired fast. Too fast. The lead went over Duke's head. Duke hammered one shot and drove him back a pair of unsteady steps, both hands thrown high.

Then he went on over, crashing down hard.

DUKE twisted toward the bar. Dan Sigden was up again, gun drawn. Duke's second shot slammed him against the counter and then face down into the sour sawdust on Hiller's floor. It was fast shooting and lucky shooting, even for him, and Duke felt his luck running out as he looked into the muzzle of Nate Sigden's gun and saw powderflame spit from it at him.

But his third shot had roared in the

same instant, and he saw Nate drop his gun and try to clutch his middle before crumpling and pitching on his back.

Shock from a hit was in Duke's right arm, and the reawakening of savage pain. He had dropped his Colt and now automatically scooped up the gun in his left hand as Hiller bobbed up again with his twin-tube scattergun.

Duke's fourth shot drove the saloon owner back into a shelf of stacked glassware, which came down in crashing ruin as both barrels of the shotgun exploded, peppering the ceiling with buckshot. Hiller fell forward again, was caught by the bar and hung there.

Silence came down in the saloon, where the reek of burned powder was strong. Duke dropped his gun again, feeling suddenly very tired. He thought of something, and began to chuckle raggedly.

The saloon's batwings flapped noisily and Doc Murtry rushed in, black physician's bag under his arm. He looked briefly at the four still figures in the room, and then at Duke, still down on one knee.

"Something funny, Doc, funny as hell," Duke said. "They scored only one hit, in the arm that was already hurt. But I can't figure who the joke's on."

"Get up, boy," Murtry said urgently. "I want you stretched out on a table."

Duke obeyed. Flat on his back, he closed his eyes, with the feeling of weariness increasing. He heard Murtry curse softly, after cutting away his sleeve.

"A good thing," the doctor muttered, "that I've got a little chloroform."

After that, it was confusing for what seemed like quite a while. Duke slept deeply, and awakened to find Murtry bending anxiously over him. He was in a bed now, with a lamp burning beside it. Then Duke slept again, more lightly. This time, he dreamed. But the dreams were pleasant. There was no giant horse, and no gaunt faces of those he had killed.

When he awakened once more, sunlight was in the room. The first thing he saw was Hugh Crail's grave, bearded face, with a cocoon of bandages above it.

Then Doc Murtry came to lean over him.

Maybe it was the expression on Murtry's face, or a strange feeling within himself that told Duke. There was no pain—he felt fine. But there was a sense of loss.

"You had to take off my arm, Doc," he said quietly.

"Yes, boy," Murtry admitted. "I might have saved it, before. But after that bullet in the saloon smashed the bone—"

"Sure," Duke told him. "Soon as I took the hit, I had a feeling it was probably going to be necessary. It's all right, Doc."

"Son," Crail said, "I got my horses back. Soon as you can be moved, you're coming with Emma and me. I'm shorthanded, now. I've got to have a man with your savvy."

"Why, thanks," Duke said, liking the way he was being asked. "I can still make out in a saddle. One hand will be plenty."

A door opened and Emma came into the room. She rushed to kneel beside him, face tear-streaked.

"Charles!" she whispered. "Dad told me everything, before I started praying for you. I'm so thankful."

He reached over awkwardly to touch her shining hair, a grin beginning as he suddenly realized how lucky he was. Without his gun hand, he was just another man. Duke Hardee was dead and buried with his lost arm. The nightmares were over. From now on, he'd be only Charles Hardee, horse-rancher, with a whole new life before him.

"Honey," he said, kissing her. "I'm the one that's thankful. More than even you can ever know."

THE END

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Frontier Breed

By

TOM STONE

WILLIAM CLARK KENNERLY, one of the lesser known frontiersmen, rubbed elbows with many of those who carved niches in the nation's history. However, the nephew and namesake of one of the partners of the Lewis and Clark expedition, did a little carving himself, having taken part in two wars, two trips to the gold fields of California, and a large scale hunting expedition.

His father, James Kennerly, was sutler at Fort Atkinson, on the Upper Missouri, when Clark Kennerly was born in 1824, but the family moved to St. Louis a few years later when the elderly Kennerly was appointed sutler of Jefferson Barracks, near-by. A prisoner at the barracks was Black Hawk, noted Indian chief, who struck up a friendship with the lad, as did Washington Irving, who visited the defeated chieftain there.

Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, Nathan

Boone, Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny, Colonel Henry Leavenworth and Sir William Drummond Stewart, Scottish sportsman and hunter bold, also made a great impression on young Kennerly, during their visits to the Kennerly home, and when Sir William organized a hunting expedition to the Far West he had no trouble persuading the youngster to go along.

Drivers, hunters, guides and trappers were among the eighty men who set out up the Missouri on the steamboat *John Aull,* to hunt bear, antelope and buffalo, "and an occasional redskin or two." Old Bill Sublette, to whom the West was an open book, was chief guide.

Father Pierre-Jean De Smet was a fellow passenger on the boat as far as Westport. Others in the group were Edmond F. Chouteau, Matt Field of the *New Orleans Times-Picayune,* and Antoine Clement, one of the West's most famous hunters. A valuable addition to the party was Baptiste Charbonneau, employed as a driver. He was a son of Sacajawea, the Indian woman who acted as guide for the Lewis and Clark expedition.

At Westport the party disembarked and proceeded overland across the plains, where they hunted in the Wind River range of mountains. While encamped on the Sweetwater young Kennerly was nearly dragged to death by his horse. Returning home, they were met at Independence by the fur company steamboat, just arrived from the Yellowstone, and the rest of the journey to St. Louis was made by boat.

At the outbreak of the Mexican war Clark Kennerly joined his friends in Battery A of the light artillery, a unit being formed in St. Louis. Commander of that battalion was Captain Richard Hanson Weightman, whom history records as the New Mexican editor who killed F. X.

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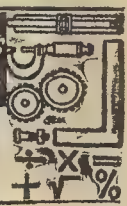

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Aubry. It was Aubry who established a record for fast horseback riding from Santa Fe to Independence. Edmond Chouteau also joined, as a lieutenant, and old Antoine Clement went along for the "good hunting" that was in prospect.

At Leavenworth they became a part of Colonel Doniphan's expedition to Mexico and took part in the battle of Sacramento, one of the great military victories of early American history. After the Mexican fracas had been settled, the Missourians returned home by way of New Orleans and the Mississippi.

Gold was discovered in California and Kennerly joined one of the earliest expeditions to the gold fields. Leaving the steamer at Independence, his party took the northern route overland, going by way of Fort Kearny and Fort Laramie, the south fork of the Platte and the South Pass. After months of diligent work in the Sacramento valley with pick and shovel, that yielded little more than wages, he returned home by steamer through the Isthmus of Panama, thence to New Orleans and up the Mississippi to home.

One such trip as this was enough for most men, but Clark Kennerly was made of sterner stuff. He tackled it again, this time his love of adventure taking him the long way home by way of Cape Horn, where he came near being shipwrecked.

When the Civil War broke out, the intrepid frontiersman enlisted with General Sterling Price and fought on the southern side, taking part in the battle of Pea Ridge and other southern engagements. While in the vicinity of Mobile he met Miss Florence Brooks and they were married. After cessation of hostilities they returned to St. Louis where he engaged in the commission business until his death in 1912 at the age of eighty-eight.

(Continued from page 70)

Cole Addis now stampeded in retreat.

Hernandez and the Pecos Kid found themselves hemmed in on two sides. The horses, frightened by gunfire, had drifted uphill. There was a nest of men ahead of them. They dived for cover as gunfire met them with a burst of flame.

Pecos lay with his face pressed in the rocky earth. He risked turning his head. He saw that Hernandez was forty feet uphill in the shelter of rock.

Pecos cried, "Keep going! Get down to the wagon train!"

His voice brought a volley of bullets. They seemed to come from all directions.

He edged along, not lifting his head, not lifting his shoulders, snaking himself, digging his elbows. He saw his chance, raised and dived to the cover of some rock.

"That's him!" he recognized Cole Addis' voice. "That's the Pecos Kid. Don't let him get away. Mutt, up the hill. Get behind that deadfall. That's his only way out."

There was a shotgun in Frye's hands. Pecos kept going, uphill, through rocks, around pine trees. The shotgun roared, but it was not aimed at him. It had fired in the opposite direction. It exploded again, wildly. Mutt lunged into sight and fell. He'd been riddled by three rapid-fire slugs from a six shooter. Hernandez!

Pecos stopped. He realized Addis had been following him. He was coming around a pine thicket.

"Cole," he said. "Cole! Put your guns in their holsters."

Addis stopped. He stood tall, straight, broad-shouldered in a scrap of moonlight. He thought himself covered. He slowly thrust his guns away. Pecos moved a step, keeping his boothold on the rocky, grassy slope, and Addis saw him.

"Suppose those bets are still up in Mascalero?" Pecos asked. He looked careless. His hands hung at his sides.

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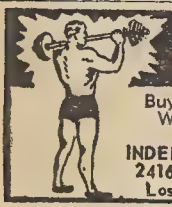

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"Yes, I suppose maybe they are."

As he spoke, Addis went for his guns. He drew with a high lift of his shoulders, the draw that had spelled death for Orofino Johnny.

But this time he was not up against Orofino, and he knew it. He knew that the bets were down for him as they'd never been before. It made his hands and arms too tense. He tried to reach too fast, grab too fast, shoot too fast.

Pecos drew one gun. He drew with a hitch, a swing of his body, a pull of the trigger, all as careless as striking a match on the side of his pants.

His bullet hit Addis and knocked him spinning. One of Addis' guns exploded. The explosion jarred it out of his hand. He caught himself and tried to come forward. He was bent over with his eyes staring shocked and without focus.

For a brief instant he'd realized what had happened, then his legs gave way.

Pecos rammed the empty cartridge cases from the gun and looked at him. He was dead, he was finished. For Addis, the end of the trail. Pecos should have felt triumphant. He didn't. He just felt tired. He wished he could wash the sweat and powdersmoke off his hands and face.

THERE was still a little long range shooting, but the wagon train rolled on, creaking over the pass, brakes groaning down the western side toward Three Forks as the sun rose and grew warm. Riding toward Butte at midday, Pecos stopped at Number Three cabin and found Big Jim sitting up in his bunk, building his strength on a thick, rare steak.

Big Jim chawed with one side of his mouth and cursed from the other. "No question of this critter getting here from Texas. He was too ornery-tough to die. You hear about the U. S. Marshal and the militia coming down from Helena? Well, they did, so those Molly Maguires

will really have somebody to toss bricks at."

"When was this?"

"I dunno. That Injun mail carrier was telling me. He says the Territorial Governor sent 'em down to clean out The Hill."

"Maybe he wasn't getting his cut."

"Sweet name o' hell, is the governor a crook like Judge Cullabine?"

"I was just talking. I don't know anything about the governor."

He walked outside, to the corral, roped himself a fresh horse, tossed the saddle on him.

Someone was at the gate. He stood up, getting a kink from his back after tightening the latigo and found himself face to face with Dolly Fillmore. She had the .32 in her hand.

He let a laugh jerk his shoulders and turned away from her saying, "If there's anything I'm tired of looking at it's the muzzle of that popgun. If you hanker to use it, go ahead."

He put a boot in the stirrup, and stopped short of mounting as she lowered the gun.

She said through clenched teeth, "I *should* kill you."

He took his foot down, dropped the reins, and walked to her.

She said, "The militia has come to Butte."

"That's what I heard."

"On orders from the Territorial governor. The Gov hates my Dad. He knows my dad has ambitions in politics. They both want to be senator when Montana becomes a state. He'd do anything to put Dad in the wrong."

"That's out of my hands. I got nothing to do with Territorial politics, and I don't own a square foot of The Hill."

"No, but you'd be the chief witness."

"Is that why you came here intending to kill me?"

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"Yes."

"Why'd you change your mind?"

"You ought to know that."

Her tone was defiant, but her eyes weren't defiant. He kissed her. She clung to him, but with a gentle application of strength he pushed her away. She would have followed him, but he lifted her high and set her on the top rail of the corral. Then he mounted his horse.

"Where are you going?" she said.

"Yonder." He jerked his head toward the west, toward Hellgate, toward the Coeur d'Alene. "I'm ridin' a long way—before it's too late."

THE PECOS KID found a trail through the hills and followed it, through mountains and forest toward the boundless wilderness of the Bitterroot, the Snake River, the Columbia. It was mining country and timber country.

He'd travel for a while, then he'd rest his saddle and send a message to Big Jim and Hernandez so they'd know where to find him. They'd have a nice little stake coming from McCabe. A man could take three or four thousand and do things with it here in the Rockies.

He stopped on a high divide. Mountains and timber lay as far as his eye could see, and after that the hint of more mountains and timber dissolving into purple. Without moving his eyes, he rolled a cigarette, drew out a match. The forest cover was dry for want of rain, so he put the match away and puffed the cigarette cold.

He was thinking that a man should never settle down and get married without seeing the country. He should see the country first, and get married on his way way. That's what he'd do. He'd return sometime and marry that girl in Butte. And if not her, the one in Miles, or maybe that sweet little Cherokee quarterbreed he'd left in Wyoming.

THE END

CRAZY LIKE A FOX!

(Continued from page 12)

They resumed their games, but froze stiff a moment later as they heard a rattle and tinkle that sounded like a pair of dice being rolled against a whiskey glass. They turned slowly and stared bug-eyed at the neat little pile of yellow nuggets reposing on the bar. Old Ben stood nonchalantly holding the empty pouch. Then one man threw his hat in the air and let out a whoop.

"He's done it! The old coot's actually struck it rich!"

With a mad rush they swept up to the bar. They drank and cheered, as old Ben limped back out to his buckboard—that old bullet wound wouldn't bother him now—and returned with a small canvas sack of gold. Yes, sir! He was going to build a palace and buy the state of Texas for a backyard for his kids to play in.

But old Ben never built any fine mansion on the hill, nor did he replace his old rig and team with a fine carriage drawn by a pair of matched bays. He just enjoyed the fame of finding riches, not in the disposal of wealth. His children were provided for; nothing else mattered. And his little girl would never have to take in any more washings.

Although he never worked another lick, the prospecting trips continued, and every time he returned he brought back a thousand dollars or more in gold. He started a bank account at Midland, and whenever it ran low on funds he would come in and make another deposit—in "hard money."

Bankers, cattlemen and other tried to buy his mine. Failing, they followed him on his trips, only to be led on a wild goose chase by the wily old fox.

"If any one wants that mine, let him go look for it," he chortled. They did—but the secret of the whereabouts of old Ben Sublette's fabulous mine died with him.

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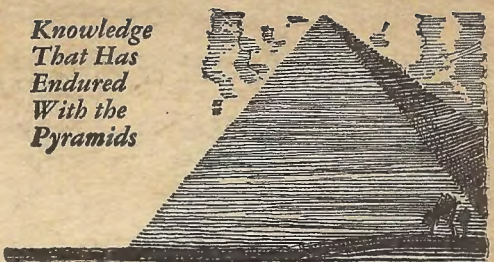

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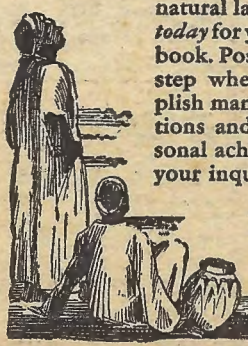

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(Continued from page 103)

was making a social call, instead of gunning for a desperate man.

Cooper opened a side door, and called, "What do you want, Commodore?"

"You," was the terse reply.

"All right," Cooper replied, but suddenly he slammed the door shut. Owens backed against a wall as a shot whistled through the panel of the door, slicing the spot where the sheriff had stood.

Owens fired twice from the hip in rapid succession, and Cooper fell to the floor, drilled twice.

Quiet reigned for a moment. Then the older Blevins brother ran from the side of the house, firing at Owens. He missed.

Owens fired again from the hip. He didn't miss.

Roberts made the next attempt. He was holding his pistol high, ready to level on Owens. The Sheriff's shot caught him between the eyes.

One Blevins was left in the house, with the mother. He was a lad of sixteen, who grabbed up a pistol and started out the door for revenge. The mother held him and pleaded with Owens not to shoot.

"A boy can pull a trigger just as hard as a man," Owens told her, as the boy jerked himself away from his mother.

One shot again from the sheriff's gun finished the clan.

It wasn't long after this incident, and the eventual killing of all the Grahams in the Pleasant Valley War, that Owens turned in his star. No one challenged his authority but the death of the sixteen year old still bothered him.

As a symbol of his leaving the war path, Owens cut off his long hair, and retired to his ranch and family.

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